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when earth whispers & Other Tales

The Gingerbread Puppet Boy
Arrangements
Miss Thurman's Intervention
The Shoreless Ocean of Eternity
When Earth Whispers
Guest Lecture
Not the Wrong Planet
I'm Not a Baby Anymore
Demon Dragonfly
Deprescience
Spark
The Cruller Twist
Just Cold
Turtle of the World
Bernie the Homeless
Genius
Baptism
Attack of the Gravid Amazons
Odd Fellows
Homesick
The Greenlandic Windows
Leaving Roanoke Island
Denying the Signs
Dreaming is Believing
Ships Passing in the Night
Skirmishing for Food

& Extras

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& Other Mostly Speculative Tales

Mickey Hunt

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These stories seem to be works of fiction.

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For my dear progeny

The Gingerbread Puppet Boy

The wrinkled old man sat patiently beside his luggage in the bus station and stared toward the glass door at the far end of the waiting room. *What was this madness?* he wondered. It had all started so innocently. He chuckled softly to himself . . .

His wife had wanted a son, plain and simple. But the doctor had told them even before they were married years ago this was impossible. She would be barren.

At first, she hadn't minded so much. She had somehow gotten comfort from their puppetry business. Making the puppets, writing plays, and designing and sewing costumes used a lot of creative energy. Also, the uncanny lifelike quality of the puppets in performance and the joyful laughter of the children satisfied some of her maternal instincts. But it never really was enough . . .

Outside the bus station, up and down Main Street, all the townspeople and half the county had collected. Apparently, the tension was too much for these factory workers and part-time farmers because a fistfight broke out. A fresh-faced boy pressed his nose up against the glass door of the waiting room, peering inside. His eyes lit up when he saw the old man. "Hey everybody!" he piped. "The racer's father is in here. I saw him on the news yesterday!"

The fistfight abruptly stopped, and the crowd that had been watching it surged through the door, eager to be nearer to the source of the irritation and excitement. A great, fat man charged through to the front. He might have been one of the fighters because he was sweaty and covered with dust. "I hear you're a relation of this troublemaker!" he said loudly as his jowls shook.

"Well, you might say I am," the old man answered.

"What did he say?" shouted two or three who were jammed up against the wall of the newly stuffed waiting room.

"He says he is a relation!" boomed the fat man.

Startled, someone backed away from the fat man and tripped. "Please, be careful of my luggage," the old man said and pulled a rather large, long box with air holes in it closer to him.

"What I want to know," the fat man demanded, "is who will pay for my broken fence and my lost cows that ran after this son of yours? And my boys took the pickup truck and have been gone for days."

"And your kid stole my car!" a voice bellowed from the wall.

"My daughter!" a woman cried, and fainted into her husband's arms.

A businessman shoved forward. "All the workmen at my factory

ran off as well. Nobody has worked a single hour since that fellow challenged them all to a race. He said nobody could catch him."

"What have you to say for yourself?" the fat man bellowed as he shook his finger at the old man.

"I can't be blamed for him," the old man replied. "He will have to take responsibility for his own actions, I suppose. Take him to the courthouse like you would anyone else, but . . . you'll have to catch him first." Here the old man looked at his box and smiled.

"That," the businessman said, "is what every Joe Baloney and Jane Salami has been trying to do! Haven't you seen the news? The whole country is crazy." The businessman scratched his head. "I just don't understand it."

The old man said, "But you can't blame him for folks chasing him. They could have just ignored him."

"Sure we can blame him!" retorted the businessman. "He trespassed on my property, and then brashly claimed nobody could catch him. So, all my workers tried right then, and most are still trying as far as I know. Just imagine 75 men running off as fast as they could go, and for some, that wasn't very fast." He was looking at the fat man.

The businessman seemed suddenly struck with the humor of the improbable situation and grinned. "As fast as they could go," he repeated, his voice starting to squeak. Then he burst into laughter.

The fat man joined in, too, as he remembered himself running and then later seeing his matronly cows tossing their heads and kicking up their heels like young heifers as they gamboled after the lanky and awkward, but incredibly fast young man. The brash fellow had called out to his herd, "My mama couldn't catch me, the workers couldn't catch me, and YOU CAN'T EITHER!" The fat man's laughter was as infective as his anger, and soon the whole crowd in the waiting room was in howling stitches.

The old man saw his chance and hoisted up the box, hugging it as he pushed through the hysterical people and out the door. He looked at his watch. Ten minutes or more before the bus was due. He sat down on the bench and recollected the musings he had before the crowd interrupted…

Everything had turned out so unexpectedly. His wife seemed content having no children until they fully retired about a year before. Then she began yearning for a real family. It was just a month ago when he had an idea. He would build the best puppet he had ever made. Maybe that would please her, he had thought.

The old puppeteer had worked long hours. They were too old for a baby, he decided, so he made the puppet boy 20 years old and life-sized. The puppet was created from a very special gingerbread, and the

pieces were baked hard and fastened together by the clip hooks and metal rings set into them. The puppeteer specially made him with movable eyes and a mouth on a head that turned every which way, just like a real one. The puppet boy was a rod puppet. Each of his limbs had a thin, wooden, black-painted rod attached, and with three puppeteers operating him at once, he would be quite realistic.

The puppeteer's wife sewed the clothes: a blue, green and yellow flannel shirt, brown corduroy pants, a red neckerchief, and a green hat. The puppeteer and his wife had been very busy and very happy.

One evening last week, they finished painting him and went to bed to let him dry overnight. The old woman must have yearned and prayed very hard for a son before she dropped off to sleep because the next morning something terribly unusual happened that started this whole mess…

The laughter inside the station faded, and the scuffling and shouting started up again. These practical people wouldn't forget their troubles so easily, the old man thought. He pulled out binoculars and looked intently down the road from where the bus was to come. The last report on the radio said that the racer had hijacked a Greyhound bus and was headed in this direction. He had already broken through at least one police blockade. Up and down the street, hundreds and hundreds of adults and children were lined up as for a parade. Some held umbrellas to shade the sun. Balloons floated high up in the sky. At the far end of the street, another police blockade stood by.

"Sure to fail like all the rest," he murmured and winked at his luggage.

The old man warmly remembered that morning when life began again. He and his wife woke up with sunshine streaming into the window on them in bed. The first thing they did, even before breakfast, was to dress their new puppet boy. The last thing to put on him was the red neckerchief. Just as the old woman knotted it around his neck, the puppet boy's head jerked up, he blinked his eyes, lifted himself from his stand which then fell over, and he ran out the door pulling off the wooden rods and calling out behind, "You can't catch me!" The old man had been following him the last few days like everyone else, but not before he had made some preparations…

Some of the people waiting for the fun craned their necks to look down the street. "Here it comes!" the fresh-faced kid piped out. The local marching band struck up a lively tune.

The crowd in the waiting room tumbled outside. The old man could barely make out the Greyhound way down the road and moving at high speed. He bent over, loosened the fastenings, and lifted the lid of the box.

"Okay," he whispered, "you can get out now. Nobody will notice."

The beautiful young puppet girl sat up and shook her long thick red hair. She stepped out of the box with a clumsy gracefulness and began some quick stretching exercises in her green running suit with yellow stripes all the way down to her running shoes.

She flashed her brown eyes at the old puppeteer. "Will he be on the bus?"

"I think so," the old man replied. "Look!"

The bus was getting nearer. Behind it, also racing madly, followed a number of police cars, blue lights flashing, a pickup truck, motorbikes, a coal truck, and other assorted vehicles. A helicopter swooped overhead. People cheered from the windows and rooftops along the street. The bus entered the town and suddenly braked. The cars right behind screeched to avoid back-ending it. The police at the barricade were ready. But right in front of the bus station, an emergency door flew open and out jumped the colorfully clad puppet boy who rolled and tumbled to his feet. The whole crowd was silent and tense with expectancy. The boy gazed for a moment at the puppet girl, then shouted a challenge to everyone within earshot.

"Nobody has caught me yet, and not one of you can either!!!"

Every single soul that heard these words thought at that moment of just one thing: to catch this impudent rascal. A roar, like when a goal is scored at a big soccer game, exploded from the hundreds of throats, and as one huge mass, they were after him.

The old man joined the slow pokes trailing behind the pack. He walked just outside of town and watched the runners swarming across a large field. Through his binoculars he saw the puppet boy way ahead of everyone, but a green-clad figure was moving up on him fast, her red hair blowing straight back.

Running, running, she was right behind him now. The puppet boy glanced over his shoulder, and she made a flying tackle. They skidded together across the grassy ground.

He was caught!

The wrinkled old puppeteer chuckled to himself. His wife would be happy. They were too old now to have children, that was sure. Too much chasing around.

But grandchildren would be nice.

END

Arrangements

David Welch, Sr. arranged flowers, but right away you've probably adopted a wrong impression about him, because he nearly made the art form into a masculine sport. As with the great chefs and composers of the world, most of the top floral designers are men. I suppose his regular work lent masculinity to his love for color, pattern, balance, theme—all those elements contributing to a finished arrangement. And his were not just "arrangements"—the masses of flowers you see at weddings or funerals—rather, they portrayed natural environments and worlds in themselves reflecting an idealization of life. He was a landscaper and a retail nursery owner—had been all of his adult life.

He didn't actually begin flower arranging until his wife died four years ago. That's when he ordered several boxes of flowers and made the funeral displays himself, weeping off and on. Those displays were simple like what you usually see, he being a beginner, though they served general expectations well enough.

Funeral flowers… never help the bereaved… They're mere thoughts, symbols of sympathy and consolation, and not real in themselves.

Hannah is real. She emanates a beauty that catches your eye, yes, but becomes even more apparent and satisfying the more you watch her, the more you get to know her. A complicated beauty and intelligence that might intimidate most men, the beauty of a talented movie star when she isn't made up and glamorized. Hannah was a friend of David's daughter, Olivia, was the same age as her, and she worked at the nursery in the summers, the Bluestone Nursery and Landscaping. Hannah had been pursuing a horticultural degree at North Carolina State University, and when she graduated, she came on board as a manager.

~

Before long, David wanted Hannah to be in charge of opening a flower shop to be associated with the retail nursery. Their story begins early one morning when she came charging into his office.

"I really don't want this new job," she said. "I don't see any meaning in it. I've told you my goal is to grow native plants and restore people's rural property to a natural state—weeding out their exotic-invasives."

Her ambition, as is obvious to anyone who knew about the place then, contradicted Bluestone's universe, because the nursery sold some of those horrible, noxious, foreign invaders, and installed them in customer's landscapes.

"We have to diversify," David said. "People still get married and die, even if they don't have money. They die, anyway. And they all—"

"Need flowers," she finished for him. "Diversify. That's my idea. Get rid of your *Euonymus alatus*—they're spreading all over the woods around here. People should turn their yards into food producing gardens. The flower shop is a direct step away from what I want to do."

Hannah is passionate about these things, but she was really thinking that people still get married, just not her.

David mused before he spoke again. Hannah stood in place shifting her weight from foot to foot, uncertain about what the day ahead would hold, uncertain of her job. Finally, David said, "I thought you were agreeable to the flower shop."

"I'm not. I didn't know how to tell you."

"Alright. Alright. I can find someone else. It'll take a while. I'm disappointed, because this will delay starting. I was actually, uh, going to become involved in the shop myself. Not running it, but I was thinking of teaching a flower arranging class—"

"Uh huh. Umm, do you want me on my regular job today, because if so, the store is about to open. I need to unload a truck."

"—more along the lines of Japanese flower arranging."

"Really?" This got her attention and put the truck out of mind. "That's what I like." She now took a chair. "I never made time to learn Ikebana. We just touched on it in a horticulture class. What school do you follow?"

"I learned from books and the internet. I suppose I have my own style. I'd like to do some formal study and learn the traditional approaches."

"Why don't you?"

"My philosophy is about how plants and rocks should be placed as they appear in nature, in relationship to each other—I don't use any man-made materials or cultivated varieties, usually. The arrangement should draw the observer into the creation. And the artist should be invisible, as if the flowers, branches, and stones were tossed into place, but still are perfect for each other."

"That's what I think," she said, but she was also thinking, *You should apply this philosophy to the rest of your business*.

"I have been listening to you," he said as a gentle remonstrance. "What about unloading the truck now? We have employees waiting for instructions."

"Oh my gosh," she said and ran out of the office.

~

Hannah did take the job of opening the flower shop for Bluestone Nursery, and David did a formal study when, during the following

winter, he flew to Japan and attended an Ikebana school for three weeks. When he returned he started teaching classes, and Hannah was among his first students. They sold quite a few arrangements, and David entered some of his best into the local county fair. Surprisingly, his style caught on, partly due to the photographs Hannah made, and in time he gained a reputation as a master, though he didn't feel he deserved the acclaim. Sometimes he was invited to speak around the state, and this enhanced his nursery business, especially when a prominent regional newspaper ran a feature story on him.

Late one afternoon David came to the flower shop, a separate building along the busy road that the retail nursery was situated on. David's shop didn't smell chemically like some florist shops do, but was more like a fresh meadow. Hannah was staring into a glass-walled refrigerator with a clipboard in hand. Her dark hair was arranged—it wasn't arranged, it fell in natural folds onto her shoulders and neck as it often does, and she has a way of absent-mindedly brushing it from her face. I'm sure there was a stray leaf in her hair.

An employee was sweeping up in the back workroom.

"Excuse me, Hannah," David said. "May I ask you a question?" He wouldn't have picked the leaf from her hair.

"Sure. Just a second." She finished scribbling on her clipboard—the flower orders for the next week—while David wandered into her office.

In a minute she came in and dropped into her chair with a sigh. "What can I do for you?"

"The International Ikebana Society asked me to speak, and do a demonstration arrangement at their annual convention."

"Great. Where is it?"

"Tokyo. I don't really want to go."

"Why not?"

"I already went to Japan once. It's enough. Tokyo is a big city and I don't like cities. It's in May, which is our busiest month."

"I'd go, if I were you. I'm sure we'll survive here. You could get out of the city and look around."

"It's not the same traveling alone." David paused here a moment and then rolled along with, "I want to ask if you will go with me. I'd cover all expenses—I'll take a business deduction. They have cultural programs you could take, things like bamboo craft, silk corsages, things to add to our offerings at the shop."

"Why me?" she asked as if he had not explained enough already.

Still sweeping, the employee passed outside her office door.

"Ah, to help collect native materials for my arrangement," David said. "It might not be easy in Tokyo."

Hannah bit her lower lip, thinking. “Separate rooms in the hotel, right?”

David gasped. “Yes! Yes! Of course. I’m shocked you felt you had to ask.”

“I didn’t have to ask. But half the people here think you and I are having an affair.”

“Oh.” David was sobered.

“It’s not your fault. Not your fault. You’ve not done or said anything improper. The more I deny it, the more everyone disbelieves me. It’s because I don’t have a boyfriend, and you, you’re fit and trim for your age.” She was remembering him mowing the lawn while shirtless—pushing a mower—at the store after hours.

“I’m flattered, because I’m getting to be the old man. But no boyfriend? I didn’t know. I don’t understand. What’s wrong with young men?”

“I—” Hannah stopped.

“Men have become emasculated,” David said, filling the silence. “They’re afraid to take risks and assume responsibilities. I have a friend in Oregon who always said he wanted to start a school for single men 25 and older, an outdoor school to teach them how to be men.”

“Olivia mentioned him.”

“The graduation exercise was to be two weeks backpacking in Alaska wilderness. They’d be dropped off by air taxi. Then they’d receive a certificate of eligibility.”

“Where are all the graduates?” Hannah’s voice was remote, withdrawn.

“He never did it—the school. It was only a dream of his. I was thinking… it’s a personal question, but—have you ever had any… eligible men in your life?”

No doubt, David didn’t understand right away why Hannah broke down and cried—he had never seen her do this before. She talked through the tears without a break. “I have a few friends, but they don’t really care about me as a woman. Only friends. You might not believe this, but I’ve never been kissed by a guy, never. They never call me, I have to call them and half the time they’re never available. I have a problem letting my feelings be known. Maybe I’m giving the wrong signals. I’ll be 28 next year.”

“Hmm.” David waited a while before saying gently, “You are an independent creature, but you’re not the problem. If I were a younger man, it wouldn’t be a problem for me. I aimed for the best, no matter how inaccessible. I tell my sons to do the same.” Here David halted for an inexplicable reason, inexplicable at the time, and then he continued. “Someday I’ll tell you how I courted my wife, Marcia.”

"Let me think about it, about the trip to Japan," Hannah said.

"Sounds fair enough."

~

She went with him to Japan. On the long series of flights he was careful not to touch her and she not to touch him, and they were successful until they both fell asleep at the same time, which happened more than once. When he awoke first, he probably eased away and when she awoke first, she didn't. Neither was very embarrassed. They didn't talk much. Being so close physically pushed them apart in other ways. But at some point she asked him, "Are you disappointed because none of your children want to take over the nursery business?"

"They had their fill of it when they were young. They'll probably sell it when I'm gone. Maybe you'll buy it someday." David looked at her and smiled.

"If I could afford it. The Bluestone… Olivia told me about the name. You were working at a rhododendron nursery in college, in the summer."

"I'm not positive it was a star sapphire, but it was beautiful." David gazed through the airplane's window, remembering. "They do find gem quality corundum in north Georgia. It was huge, the size of two fists."

"But you gave it to the nursery owner?"

"Yep. It might have been worth a lot of money."

"You gave it away."

"But if I kept it my life would be different. I like my life as it is."

"You have three children."

"Three and four grandchildren… five, I mean. My son Calvin Joel and his wife have the four. Olivia and her husband are expecting their first."

"I know. You have another son? Nobody talks about him."

"He's been a wanderer, but he's done with wandering now."

David abruptly changed the subject by saying, "Besides what I've told you before, there's another reason why I wanted you to come with me. Most of the attendees are women, older women from the U.S. and Scandinavia, as you'll see. Having you there will keep them off of me. I can't stand their flirting. It's obnoxious."

Hannah showed pain on her face, but only said, "You're wearing your wedding ring."

"It doesn't always work."

~

Nothing terribly spectacular happened during the Ikebana convention. Hannah and David often pursued different paths during the day and met for a late restaurant dinner. They spent a whole day together collecting materials for his demonstration arrangement, intending to

acquire the bulk of it surreptitiously, clipping from parks, open spaces, or commercial landscapes, and purchasing the rest from shops.

On one foraging stroll through a neighborhood, they found that practically every square foot of outside ground was trimmed and groomed. As they were about to make their first illicit cut, an old Japanese man stepped up to them and shook his head. None of them knew enough language to communicate nuances, but when Hannah showed the man her convention ID tag, he frowned, bowed slightly, and said in heavily accented English, "Flower arrangement, flower arrangement." He pulled clippers from his jacket and motioned for them to follow. As they walked along the sidewalk adjacent to private homes, he stopped now and then to study some flowers or foliage. Occasionally, he clipped something off and handed the results to Hannah. She placed them all into a duffel bag containing damp towels. There were some particularly fine pine branches.

After a bit, a young girl left a house and spoke to the old man in Japanese, then nodded to David and Hannah and said, "Hello. You are Americans? Mr. Masayuki is a gardener for this neighborhood. He has permission. We wish for you good luck at your convention and hope you enjoy Japan."

Nothing spectacular or out of the ordinary took place except for one evening—the evening set apart for designing the special arrangement.

David's hotel room was a mess, what with enclaves of sorted geologic and classified plant material, the latter in buckets of water. Leaves and clippings strewn all over the floor and furniture. Hannah brought in a bottle of wine. David was already working at a wooden table the hotel had moved into the room. They would have dinner brought to them later. David talked through his ideas and placed and replaced material in the primary container. From time to time he would undo everything and start over. He was having difficulty finding perfection. It seemed his expectation had risen higher than what was possible in this world, as if the whole concept of flower arranging had fallen short. Once in a while, individual visitors—or a clutch of giddy women—from the convention would drop by to see the progress.

One lady who had been scowling at Hannah said, "So, Mr. Welsh, you plan to recreate your design tomorrow before an audience?"

"And narrate the process, and his thinking," Hannah replied.

Visitors hadn't been invited and knew conversation was unwelcome, so after their furtive, admiring looks at David, they never stayed long.

Dinner arrived all under stainless steel domes. The city was growing dark in the windows. Hannah had been taking photographs and said

little, until, seeing that David's mental block had finally immobilized him, she whispered, "We should break."

There wasn't much for them to discuss during the meal, unless they were to open a new subject, or an unfinished subject, which Hannah did.

"You said you might tell me how you courted your wife. I'd like to hear about that."

David assumed a blank look as if this was the furthest thing from his mind.

"You don't have to talk about it, if you don't want to," Hannah said.

"No, it's okay. I need to clear my head."

"What was she like, before her stroke?"

"She was… a lot like you." David looked at her closely. "Feisty."

Hannah glanced away. "I don't mean to be."

"Marcia and I met in college. She was a freshman and I a junior. We were only friends during those two years, and when she had a boyfriend, or I a girlfriend, it was always someone else. None of those romantic college relationships lasted long. When I graduated, I did some overseas work with a service organization, and by the time I returned to the United States, she had moved back to California, and I went to graduate school—in business. I was talking with a Taiwanese friend about women, you know—he was married and wanted to know why I wasn't—and Marcia was on the list we made of interesting girls I had known. It was a short list. I wasn't in contact with any of them, and my friend suggested I seek them out. Marcia was the only one who wrote back.

"We started corresponding, and after some months I flew out to California to propose. She hadn't told me she had a steady boyfriend, but he wasn't ready to commit—had not been ready for far too long—and she accepted my marriage proposal on the spot."

"That's crazy."

"But it's a crazy world."

"It's easier for men," Hannah said. "If women take the initiative, decent men think they're forward, or loose. And men don't initiate. Olivia told me about a guy who said he'd take care of her, but he would never call her. He expected her to call him. She said, 'You want to marry me, but you won't call me on the phone?'"

"I heard the story."

"She eventually proposed to him."

"My suggestion, and he turned her down." David shook his head. "She has a good husband now."

"He's younger than she is," Hannah said, pouring some wine.

"Will you ever marry again?"

"I hate traveling alone, but living alone isn't too bad, in our house. I'd rather have Marcia. Marcia before the stroke…"

"You lost her years before she died."

"The best part of her."

"It's not good to be alone," Hannah said as a platitude.

"I read about how after World War I in Europe, so many young men had been killed that it produced a demographic vacuum. Women who would have gotten married and who were raised to be wives and mothers became old maids. It was the war. We are in the same situation now." He put down his chopsticks.

"Not because of the wars, but because of the culture."

"Yeah," David said to begin a long silence, then, "I'm ready to work now."

Hannah, who had drunk more than her half of the bottle of wine, yawned.

This time Hannah forgot her camera, stood next to him, and offered remarks and critiques, even placing material to illustrate her thoughts. In less than an hour, they were done. They stood back to admire the natural perfection in miniature they had created.

"Will I be able to make it again fresh tomorrow?" he asked.

"It will… be better."

It seemed perfectly natural when, as they stood side-by-side, Hannah wrapped her arm around his, sided up to him, and leaned her head on his shoulder. She yawned again, sleepily.

He put his hand on hers and she turned to face him. He restored her arm in his and walked her to the door of his room and into the hallway. When they reached her door, he said, "Where's your key?"

When he had her key, he opened the door and she stepped inside and turned around.

He stood his ground.

"Are you coming in?" Then, seeing his dismay, in a panic she said, "To talk, I mean. I could make us tea. My room isn't trashed like yours is."

"You're like Ruth," he said. "But I'm not Boaz. You're a dear girl. Goodnight, Hannah."

Hannah was so tired that she didn't feel anything specific then about David's reaction to her romantic invitation, if invitation it was, since she herself wasn't sure. She wasn't sure until morning when her mind was awake. She was attracted to him—loved him, actually—and her womanly instincts had taken over. Ruth, Boaz? In her hotel room, she found the story on the internet, a complex story, but basically about a young widow who had offered herself to a noble older man who took

her as his wife.

Hannah cried then for a long while in her room.

~

David, Sr. was not Boaz. It seemed clear enough. He never discussed the incident with her, never even mentioned it again, not on the airplane trip home, nor at the nursery or the flower shop, and until he passed away from an unsuspected heart ailment two months later, he treated Hannah the same as before, as a friend, a fellow artist, and a valuable employee.

In the evening before the funeral, Hannah climbed the hill behind the nursery and sat there alone. The hill is mostly pasture with a few oak trees. She looked down at the buildings, the greenhouses, and the precise arrangements of trees and shrubs in containers and balled-and-burlapped in the heeling-in beds. The broad beds of brilliant color and the empty parking lot in front. The flower shop at the corner of the property. All this the hub of the life's work of an older man she had grown to love. These moments on the hill with the sun sinking below the horizon behind her was her parting, her grieving. She believed she would never meet anyone else like him.

~

His death brought me home, home for the first time in years. It was comforting to be back in the town where I grew up. His death and the funeral were my graduation from a long, painful schooling in life. The music of the ceremony and the meaning of the flowers overwhelmed me with joy. I spoke at the funeral, and it was my valedictorian address. I wasn't convinced if I should talk about such things at a memorial, or if I could get through without breaking down, but death brings out honesty and humility, it destroys illusions; a seed must die as a seed before it can grow into the plant it's meant to be.

During my speech, I heard murmuring in the audience and two or three people walked out; it's a touchy issue and people are touchy.

I told the five to six hundred people in the church that I had lived as a gay man for a dozen years, and that only recently I had renounced this life and pledged to seek what God and nature intended for me: to be a husband and father, even at my age of 34, if I ever met the right woman. I told about how my own dad, David, Sr. had never shied from telling me the truth, never made it easy to rebel, never conceded to my confusion, never acted as if certain relationships I had were normal, never hated me, and never gave up on me. I talked about being raised in our family, and how Dad taught us to work and gave us a love for plants leading me to an advanced degree in botany, to satisfying research, and a university teaching position in Virginia. I thanked him one last time for who he was.

After the ceremony, there was a reception—a long, wide line of people to greet. Most of them didn't know me, and I stood by myself much of the time. A few polite nods. My sister and brother and their families received all the attention. Those who knew me had known me as a child, and were perhaps uncomfortable talking with the dubious, grieving grown man. But there was a young woman who came right up without waiting in line. She was wearing an elegant black dress and a purple orchid corsage.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Hannah. I worked for your dad."

"Hannah, glad to meet you. I'm David—David, Junior. You gathered as much from my speech. I heard you made the fantastic flower arrangement on the altar. Until you walked up to me, I've never seen anything more amazing, so lovely."

"David, Junior," she said, flushing. "You look a lot like him. Your dad and sister referred to you sometimes, but I never heard your name before this moment."

"Not surprising, but I'm here now. Dad had been trying to get me to visit since his last Japan trip. I think he'd be proud of me today. He knew of the changes happening in my life."

"You gave a brave eulogy. Since his last Japan trip, you say?" She seemed to glow even more. "I *know* he would be proud and happy."

"Why?"

"Maybe he's been thinking about you more than you realize. Umm, remember how the Bluestone Nursery got its name?"

"I'm sure Dad told us, but I've forgotten."

"The star sapphire he found in north Georgia, the one he gave away."

"Oh, yeah. Now, I remember. How does—?"

"But I'm wondering, do you like landscaping with edible and native plants?"

"Dear girl, it's my specialty," I said with a foolish grin. "How did you know? Hey, when we're done here, let's talk someplace. What, what are you doing this evening? What's absolutely the finest locally owned restaurant in town? My treat."

~

The epilogue to this story, as if I needed to explain, is that Hannah and I married, and I quit my job at the university to run Bluestone Nursery and Landscaping with her.

END

Miss Thurman's Intervention

A horde of blatting, deafening Harley motorcycles rolled by Whatley's Farm Supply, halting all conversation, all thought.

Barry Sullivan shook his lanky blonde hair and clucked the tip of his tongue. "Miss Thurman, I'm not working for you anymore on my day off," he said to the woman beside him and closed the hatch of her Subaru.

"Here, take this." Miss Thurman held out a folded $10 bill.

"Now, you know I'm not allowed tips."

"You're a young man and you need money for your future, for your braces when you get them. You *should* go to college." She paused a moment and said, "I couldn't possibly lift those chicken feed bags when I get home. My figure has turned into a dumpling."

Barry pursed his lips over his jutting front teeth. "I've saved money for braces. This is a good job—Whatley's pays for health insurance, too. Did you hear me? I won't do your yard work unless we clean up your house. You have a problem."

Miss T's lower lip drooped like she might cry.

"You're not getting younger, Miss Thurman, and you need your house in order. You want to have company, some visitors once in a while."

"Are you going to load my Rose of Sharons?"

The plants in two-gallon liners waited on the wagon that Miss T. had dragged across the parking lot. Barry peered into the back seat of her car and saw stuff piled up to the windows. The front passenger side was the same. "No room. Like your house."

Miss T. stood motionless, helpless. "It's not bad. I get by."

"No you don't. There's hardly room to walk."

"Will you bring my flowers on Monday? And plant them for me?"

"You're impossible. I will bring them over."

"And carry the feed bags to my shed. I go to the church at 10:00 a.m. to work in the memorial garden, so come before, please."

"You have a nice day, Miss Thurman. Think about what I said."

Miss T. drove away, and Barry wheeled the wagon to his immaculately spotless pickup truck and loaded her plants. He returned the wagon to its home by the annuals.

Whatley's Farm Supply was experiencing a rare moment when no customers demanded his services. Barry gazed around the inside of the store, a warehouse with metal siding and roof. When he had hired on in high school, the place was a mess. Tools were buried and tangled. New seed got sold, and old seed got older and weevil-ridden. Spilled fertil-

izer covered the floor. The store stank of noxious pesticide fumes. Rats pooped and chewed everywhere. Worst of all, the maggot-infested hams hanging on the wall.

Outdoors, Whatley's had been a jumble of rotting fence posts, crumbling concrete statues, rusting farm implements, and ripped-open mulch bags. In time, Barry organized and cleaned it all and trapped the devilishly smart rats, even coming in on holidays and working without pay. He had built a special room for pesticides and installed ventilation.

He sighed in happiness at the present neatness and then noticed a scrap of string on the floor near the horse ration stacks.

"Barry!" It was old Mr. Whatley yelling from the cash register. "Barry, Ms. Ledford wants four pounds of hairy vetch seed!"

~

Whatley's Supply closed on Sundays and reopened on Mondays, but Barry took off Mondays except in springtime. On his days off, he cut firewood, painted, and performed yard work. He also substituted on a newspaper route, which often got him up early to make the most of the day. Living by himself in a tidy, two-room apartment, he had expenses.

The following Monday, he stopped by Denny's for breakfast and waited until Miss T. was sure to have left for her church, Fern Prairie Baptist.

He pulled into her driveway and sat awhile, until he noticed the full chicken feed bags lying on the ground in a heap.

Risky, he thought. *Never have done this before.*

He unloaded her plants, carried the dew-dampened feed bags to the shed, and walked up to the front porch. Miss T. kept a key tucked under a weedy flower planter, but Barry had never been in her house. Had looked in through the back door, but never had been inside, not even for the bathroom, because Miss T. didn't let him. Barry was comfortable with the woods.

The front door barely budged—there was stuff piled up behind it. Barry had forgotten she always used the back door. He shoved hard, heard thumping, squeezed through, and gagged. The house reeked of cat pee. With supreme effort, he managed to hold down his Denny's. On a narrow footpath, he crept through the rooms with an expression of disgust and horror stamped on his face. Wild-eyed cats scatted. Cats, but they didn't suppress the mice, which had left calling cards everywhere. Heaps of junk covered the floor, coffee table, couches and chairs, beds.

Where did she sleep?

The dining room and kitchen tables were piled with elongated pyramids, as if Miss T. had been studying angles of repose—Barry

fancied he might be an Agricultural Engineer someday. Partly empty food cans, crushed milk jugs, and unwashed dishes and pots had been tossed into mounds in the kitchen.

Where did she eat?

Barry gingerly opened the refrigerator and stepped back.

Smelled like sour, fermenting pig slop.

Barry smiled. Miss T's would be a challenge to rival Whatley's.

He took a last look around to fix the effect in his memory, but something caught his eye. Something unusual he had missed before, obscured by stacks of cardboard boxes. In a corner of the formal dining room sat a card table faced by a folding chair. Barry turned on the desk lamp. The tabletop was nearly clear, almost neat, with ballpoint pens and sheets of stamps.

Miss T. worked here!

Barry picked up a gaudy, printed sheet of paper from the table.

Miss T. entered sweepstakes!

This from Publishers Discount House "guaranteed" an Alaska cruise. She had filled in the information and stuck a stamp on the envelope. The top cardboard box in the nearest stack was full of promotionals from sweepstakes she had already entered. A hodgepodge of coupons and rebate literature was stuffed in another box. He plucked out a coupon. Expired three years ago.

"Hmm," he hummed.

Outside again, he breathed deeply to purge his lungs. He skipped the lunch hour and mowed his lawns. Afterwards, he drove to the Fern Prairie Baptist, one of those churches that started small in the city and when it grew beyond its walls, added on, and when it grew exponentially, moved into the country for cheaper land. It was nearly 5 o'clock and surely Miss T. had long since departed.

At exactly five, a man with a rounded belly approached a car parked in a space designated for pastors.

Barry ambled over. "Excuse me, sir."

The man glanced at his phone and said, "How can I help you?"

"Not me, but someone in your church. Miss T.—I mean, Miss Thurman."

"Yeah, I know her. She does flowers for the altar once a month."

"Not just the altar. She works in the memorial garden and takes care of your roses."

"She does? I didn't realize."

"Miss Thurman has a problem. She… Her house is a mess. She's got a hoarding, saving, possessive sickness. In her mind, you know. She can't throw anything away. She likes to do crafty things, and she's bought tools and supplies, but they're disorganized, and she can't find

anything. So, she buys new ones and throws *them* down. Cluttered isn't the word. She sees value to every bit of junk and every plant. Plants to her are orphans. She finds them where I work, the scraggly ones, and feels sorry for them, and so she buys them, but her yard has no plan. She has me stick them in randomly, *if* they get planted—the roots usually grow out of the pots first."

"Sounds serious," the man said and looked again at his phone.

"It's worse. She never has anyone visit. She's lonely."

"She's embarrassed to have anyone over."

"Can you help her?" Barry said. "I mean, um, with counseling? Or, I've heard of… *intervention*? Where her friends gather and give her therapy sessions. You could pull a team together and clean out her house while she supervised."

"In circumstances like this, the person should be absent. They couldn't handle seeing other people make decisions about their possessions and property."

"Makes sense," Barry said, convinced.

"Listen, I'm only an associate, but I'll ask Pastor Andy and see what he says. We have a staff meeting first thing tomorrow. I'll bring it up."

"Okay."

"What's your name?"

"Barry Sullivan."

The man shook Barry's hand. "Good to meet you. Do you have a church home?"

"No, sir."

"Come visit us on Sunday. We'd love to have you."

~

In the evening Miss Thurman called. Barry let his message machine answer because he knew it might be her.

"Barry, please help me in my yard," she said, dolefully. "I'm lost without you. No one else will work for me."

Barry moaned.

On his lunch break the next day he called the church. A secretary answered.

Barry said, "I talked with one of your preachers yesterday. Didn't get his name, but he was supposed to—"

"Probably Richard Thompson. He just left. Uh, he's on vacation tomorrow and won't be back for a couple weeks. Can someone else help you?"

"Well… anybody."

Music came on of a sort Barry had never heard before. He listened to the bawled out, whiny words—like love poetry—but then he realized

they were about Jesus. It was a radio station. Before the song ended, "Matt" the announcer came on the radio live, pushing authority into his voice like a talk show host as he discussed an upcoming concert, a fundraiser for the station.

A minute later, a deep, soothing voice cut in and said, "This is Pastor Andy."

"I'm Barry and I talked with Minister Thompson yesterday. He said he'd mention Miss Thurman at your meeting. She needs help with cleaning her house, and she's lonely and needs, just needs people to care for her. Did you all make a decision?"

"What was the name?"

"Barry."

"The name of the other person."

"Miss Thurman."

"Is she a member of our church?"

Barry's whole body clenched. They had *not* discussed Miss Thurman, and this man did *not* know who she was. "Mr. Andy, Pastor Andrew, I'm sorry for wasting your time. You have a good day."

"Well, come see us Sunday morning, young man. We'd be glad to have you."

"Mr. Andrew," Barry said with heat, "Miss Thurman grows your roses and maintains your memorial garden. She arranges your altar flowers."

And then Barry hung up before the preacher could say anything to make him angrier.

~

That afternoon at Whatley's, and while he cooked dinner and later washed and buffed the dishes, Barry stewed over the situation. During the night, he dreamed a monstrously messy cruise ship glided by, and on deck a crowd of strangers circled a frightened, weepy Miss Thurman. In the morning, the shifting, twisting possibilities settled into an idea.

After work he spent an hour at the public library's computer. Next day, he got off early and drove to a print shop. Before long, he had his materials together and a short speech written.

But who would give it? Maybe Matt would.

He called the radio station. Matt came to the phone.

Barry said, "I'm Barry Sullivan, and I'd like to hire you as, as a voice talent."

"Okay. What are you considering? A commercial? My rate is $300 a studio hour. That's inexpensive in the business."

"It's um, a practical joke."

"Okay."

"I want you to call a friend and tell her she's won an Alaska cruise. Tell her the airplane tickets and cruise details will be sent in the mail, and she might, might have her picture taken."

"What's the purpose of the joke?"

"Promise not to tell anyone?"

"That depends," Matt said.

"Well, I'm really giving her the cruise. I've saved up for braces, but this is more important. I don't want her to know it's from me. She's an older lady who needs encouragement. I work at Whatley's Supply and do her yard work."

"Yard work? Barry, if you're legitimate—and you sound like it to me—I'll call her for you, for free. Send me the script—do you have one?"

"Yeah, and I'll make a donation to your radio station."

~

Miss Thurman believed she had won the Alaska sweepstakes, not at first because she thought it was a scam and the free trip was to Las Vegas; she believed it when Barry's fake literature and the real airplane ticket to Vancouver arrived. She believed it even though no Prize Car appeared at her driveway and no one took publicity pictures, even though the cruise was for one person and not two, and even though she was able to join the cruise only three weeks after Matt's phone call.

Barry hired his little brother, Earl, who lived in a foster home (it was midsummer when school was out); he rented a dumpster and took vacation days.

Barry and Earl started with a general trash pick up and cleared the furniture into the yard, covering it with tarps. Then they went room by room. They sorted by categories: obvious garbage, sellable items, items to keep, and items for Goodwill. Barry bought shelves and tubs and consolidated and organized her keepsakes and craft supplies. The boys mopped, scrubbed, dusted, deodorized, sanitized, swept, vacuumed, washed, wiped, shampooed, rinsed, dried, shook, folded, and aired; and they trapped the mice. Barry posted duplicate tools and appliances on Craigslist. They worked every day from early morning to late night. They fed the chickens and collected eggs, as Barry had already promised while she was gone.

He carted two sick cats to the vet and locked the others outdoors.

When at last they had perfectly polished the interior of the house, Barry and Earl tackled the yard, mowing, pruning, planting, weeding—work accumulated since Barry had gone "on strike."

The rental company hauled away the dumpster, full.

~

When Miss Thurman arrived back home, refreshed and energized

like a filly, she was tickled to see her trimmed and tidied yard, but when she entered the house she was amazed and scared, then devastated, humiliated, and then angry beyond saying.

The police arrested Barry for burglary.

He got out of jail later in the day with a pledge to appear in court. Miss Thurman didn't think it important to prosecute Earl.

After all the help he gave her, Barry was upset with Miss Thurman, so he intended to plead Not Guilty. Their relationship was strained, but Miss Thurman still wanted him to do yard work, and since the house was clean, Barry agreed. So, when he arrived, Miss Thurman appeared to squash her simmering anger, but also not show how truly pleased she was about her house. And Barry didn't openly gloat when she let him eat lunch at the kitchen table and use the indoor bathroom.

He looked around warily for signs of growing mess. So far, everything looked fine.

Late afternoon, a Buick pulled into the driveway, and from it climbed four women dressed for society, wearing hats and perfume.

"Is this the residence of Miss Thurman?" the first lady asked Barry.

"Yes, ma'am."

She pointed her finger. "You're the *criminal*. We read in the paper. Pastor asked us to pay a call." She straightened her back and proceeded to the house.

"Haven't been convicted yet, ma'am," Barry said behind her.

The other ladies each shook Barry's hand. The last one whispered near his ear, "Good work, Barry. We should have helped Miss Thurman a long time ago. Pastor Andy was embarrassed. Yard looks great, by the way."

At 5:30 Barry knocked at the back door to be paid. Miss Thurman, flushed pink and at the tail of her laugh, greeted him. She scowled when she remembered she was the victim. "Come in," she said, pretending resignation.

A tinkling from the parlor told that the women were collecting their tea cups and saucers.

Barry said, "Here's the money my brother and I made selling your extra things."

She shook her head furiously.

He stood mute while Miss Thurman wrote his paycheck. As usual, he peeked at the amount. He pursed his lips and took a deep breath. It was twice what she ordinarily paid! She tore the check from her book.

"Miss Thurman," he said, beginning a protest.

She stopped him by waving the check in his face, the check snapping in the air. "Don't think I'm letting you off the hook." Softer she said, "You have a problem, Barry. You need help yourself."

Barry didn't know what he could safely say. "Thank you, Miss Thurman," was safe enough.

~

No one explained why the trial date actually came speedily.

Itching from a self-inflicted buzz haircut, Barry showed up at the courthouse on the appointed Monday morning. He hadn't hired a lawyer, and he didn't want a public defender, so he had to sit all day and hear the other trials—and a sorry lot of business it was—while waiting for his name to be called. He should have brought the new *Popular Mechanics* his father sent by subscription.

About 4 o'clock, the courtroom emptied except for the bailiff who eyed Barry with suspicion. A man entered and whispered to the bailiff. The man—apparently the prosecutor—told Barry his trial was beginning.

Then Barry's little brother, Earl, slipped into the seat beside him.

"What are you doing here?" Barry whispered.

Earl just frowned.

Barry pulled in a small breath and blew it out. He stood up and stretched. The courtroom was filling up again, or at least with twenty people, among them Miss T. He collected his materials and walked to the defense table.

"All rise," a new bailiff shouted and introduced the new judge auctioneer style, as bailiffs do. The Honorable Herbert James Smith.

Miss Thurman testified first. With tears in her eyes and indignation in her voice, she said she had trusted Barry and he trespassed upon her person. That he had no right to organize her life, that if she wanted to live in a messy home, it wasn't his business. Moreover, she said, the young man had discarded her valuable possessions, some of which held precious memories for her.

Barry was moved. He hadn't really thought about this before. Well, he *thought*, but he hadn't *felt*. Maybe Miss Thurman was right.

When the prosecutor had no more questions for her, Judge Smith asked if the defendant had any. Barry jumped up and cleared his throat. "Um. Miss Thurman, um. What do you allege that I threw away or sold, exactly?"

She glared. Then, self-conscious, she said, "I'm not so sure. I can't think of anything now." She laughed a little. "But you had no right."

"I have an inventory, Your Honor, of everything except for the plain garbage." Barry held out a sheaf of handwritten notes. "May I?" he asked.

Judge Smith gestured toward the witness box.

Miss Thurman took her glasses and silently read through the lists, her lips moving, hands shifting sheets of paper. "Anyway," she said,

"most of this, I'd say good riddance to, but… Oh, the bread maker. I'd like it back."

"Did you ever use it?"

"No."

"Did you ever open the box?"

"No."

"When did you buy it?"

"I don't know. Maybe 15 years ago."

"Did I get a fair price?"

Miss Thurman glanced at the list again. "Yes, but that's not the point."

"Is there anything else you wanted to keep?"

She shuffled more pages and stopped. Her eyes misted over. With her voice higher in pitch and breathing in small gasps, she said, "It's not on a list, but the silk Christmas wreath… My father gave it to me when I was a girl. It had artificial holly leaves and red beads. I know it was falling apart. It was rubbish, really, but it's all I had from him. All I had."

She pulled out a handkerchief.

Barry almost felt teary himself.

"I'm done," Miss Thurman said, and the bailiff helped her from the witness box. As she passed Barry, she said, "You looked nicer with long hair."

The next person to be called was a complete surprise. Mrs. Conley, the school psychologist, wearing a blue skirt with a grey striped blouse and dangly purple earrings.

At the prosecutor's promptings, Mrs. Conley said, "Barry graduated from high school two years ago. He was a much better-than-average student—B's and a few C's, but with A's in Math and Shop. Nevertheless, Barry had a problem. He bordered on clinical Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder. It never manifested as disabling to *him*, but it drove people—his sibling, adults and other students, the people around him—*crazy* because he manipulated them into participating in his neatness. He wearied people with tediousness about arranging the world to suit his needs. It was a good quality gone awry. I encouraged his parent to find treatment for him, but the parent was intractable."

"Parent?" the prosecutor said. "One parent?"

"His father. His mother died when he was young, and the father never re-married."

"Mrs. Conley, you have a Master's Degree in Psychology?"

"And a Doctorate in adolescent social disorders."

"Then, *Dr.* Conley, in your professional opinion, what are contrib-

uting factors to Barry's compulsive disorder?"

Barry jumped up. "Your Honor, this is personal!"

"I believe," Judge Smith said, "the issue is relevant. Go ahead, Dr. Conley."

"Barry's father is a convicted abuser of illegal drugs, and Barry sought to control the emotional chaos around him by organizing his physical environment. It compensated for what he lacked in family stability."

Barry trembled and his face twitched. He had heard people say this sort of thing about him before.

"One more question, if I may," the prosecutor said. "Can people with Barry's condition find help?"

"Yes." Mrs. Conley smiled at Barry. "Once they recognize that they have a problem, the right kind of counseling, and friendship, will help them identify and manage their compulsive impulses when they arise."

"Thank you."

"Mr. Sullivan," Judge Smith said, "do you have any questions for Dr. Conley?"

"Um. Mrs. Conley, did you know you have a lipstick smudge on your teeth?"

Earl in the back sniggered and choked it off.

With eyebrows raised, and mouth clamped shut, Mrs. Conley stared at Judge Smith who glanced away. *He* would not deny or confirm a smudge. Mrs. Conley stepped down and didn't smile again until she had looked into the ladies room mirror.

To Barry's astonishment, Earl took the stand next. Then two of Barry's buddies, then his boss, Mr. Whatley. Even Amy from high school, who, with her sister, he used to take to antique auto shows and bull riding competitions back when he had more time. They all agreed Barry had a problem.

He didn't have the heart to ask any questions.

As if Barry hadn't already been beaten into the dirt, as if he had not been forced, more or less, to watch a YouTube video of himself obsessing over everyone's litter, lint, and clutter, one more person emerged to testify, an emaciated prisoner sporting an orange jumpsuit and dragging a clinking iron chain between his ankles.

Barry set his jaw to prepare for further torment.

Once the bailiff swore in the prisoner, the prosecutor said, "You're Barry Sullivan's father, correct?"

"Yes, sir, he's mine. He'd be a handsome boy, too, if he fixed his teeth." Sullivan opened his mouth wide to show his gums, the upper teeth gone entirely. "That's what meth will do," he said, vaguely flip-

ping one hand.

"Mr. Sullivan, to your knowledge, did your son ever steal anything?"

"He stole my cigarettes and drugs. But he threw them down the toilet, or in the furnace."

"Did he break into your premises to burglarize?"

"Yeah, he discovered where I lived and stole stuff when I was asleep or high. He turned me in to the police, too."

Sullivan had been glancing at Barry throughout, but now he focused on him. "Barry, I'm sorry for being a bad father. You're a good boy with good intentions, but you stepped over the line at this lady's house. I'm worried."

Judge Smith had been saying, "Mr. Sullivan, Mr. Sullivan," but Sullivan kept talking.

"Take care of yourself, son, and don't fret over other people's messes, people not *family*. You need help. Don't be me, an addict in jail, old before my time."

The prosecutor had no more questions for the witness, and Judge Smith asked Barry if he had any. He did.

"Hey, Dad, how's it going?"

"Been clean a year, since I was arrested. In a decent recovery program, finally. When will you visit?"

"Soon. My next day off. Sorry I haven't yet. When do you get out?"

"Six months."

"Good to see you," Barry said.

"Hey, buddy!" Sullivan called to Earl in the back.

Judge Smith gaveled this drama to a close, disappointing the spectators, all of whom had been afflicted with swelled throats and troublesome tears. A sheriff's deputy escorted the prisoner out.

"Does the defendant wish to call any witnesses?" Judge Smith asked.

Under his breath, Barry said, "You've *talked* to everybody I know," but out loud he said, "No, sir. I filmed the house before we cleaned, if you'd like to see it."

The bailiff rolled the TV around so everyone could see. Judge Smith cringed when the disaster panned across the screen, but he kept his face impassive. From the courtroom arose grunts, gasps, and other vocalizations. No one had believed the house had been that bad.

After the video, Judge Smith said, "Then does the defendant wish to make a final statement?"

Barry stood up. "Um, Your Honor. About the burglary. Our work was worth more than the junk we threw away. And, I spent the money

I'd saved up for my braces on her plane tickets and the cruise. It's all gone, the braces money. We—my brother and I—we really helped her."

From the back of the courtroom (next to Earl) Miss Thurman said, "You had no right."

Judge Smith gently tapped his gavel.

"I know that now," Barry said, turning around. "I do know."

"Okay," Judge Smith said. "Closing remarks from the prosecution?"

The prosecutor stood half-way up. "No, Your Honor. I think we heard a confession."

"I agree. Then…" There was a long, long pause, while Judge Smith fiddled with his gavel. "Then, the court finds Mr. Barry Sullivan guilty of Burglary in the Second Degree." He thumbed open a big book, read silently and said, "Class D Felony. Penalty is… 38 months in jail, suspended, provided that Mr. Sullivan give 80 hours of community service, that he receive court-approved counseling, and… that he buy back as much of Miss Thurman's property as is possible from the proceeds from what he sold. The court so orders."

~

Mondays, Barry began working off his community service at the Fern Prairie Baptist memorial garden with Miss Thurman as his supervisor. After he recovered what little he could of the "stolen property" from the Craigslist sales, he told Miss Thurman he'd bring her those items on his next day off. However, before the day, she called him at noon and insisted he come to her house *right away* after Whatley's.

"*Right away."*

When he arrived, the road in front was packed with cars and the yard jammed with people. Barry thought maybe the house had burned down or Miss Thurman had a stroke, but there were no fire trucks or ambulances. The only similar vehicle was a van painted in outrageous glossy emerald, scarlet, and gold. The house had been painted too, by the Fern Prairie Baptist youth during his recent absence.

Barry tucked in his shirt and wandered through the throng. It was a party, with people rosy-cheeked and whooping. Neighbors, friends, church ladies, stray dogs, and total strangers. Local reporters with notebooks and cameras. A beaming film crew. Even Amy and her sister.

Was that really the Honorable Judge Herbert Smith leaning against the powder-blue Mustang? Did he just wink at Barry?

A man wearing a gray suit and a pretty woman in a stylish ruby dress held a giant poster resembling a paycheck.

Miss Thurman stood regally on her front porch, the center of the festivity. When she saw Barry inching up the sidewalk, she rushed

down the stairs and gave him a bear hug.

"Barry," she cried, "I won the Publishers Discount House Sweepstakes and the Alaska cruise. The Grand Prize! I really won it! Since I already had my cruise, I'm opting for cash and I'm paying for your braces, and I'm giving you a full scholarship to the state university to study Agricultural Engineering."

Barry froze in place, blinking, his mouth open.

"Hey everyone," she shouted breathlessly and waved, "here's the young man!"

The crowd cheered and cameras snapped.

"Miss Thurman," Barry said quietly, "thank you so much for your generous offer. I'm shocked and truly grateful, but I'm wondering about something. It's been bothering me. The jobs I'd like to have someday in engineering… They won't hire a person with a criminal record."

The crowd moved in closer and hushed, so as to hear better.

"Stop obsessing," Miss Thurman said. "I was going to tell you anyway, so it might as well be now. The trial wasn't real, no more than your phony sweepstakes was. Some people in my church put it on, like a charade. We have a trustee who is a County Commissioner, and he reserved the courtroom, and there was a lawyer and a retired judge. It was a payback, Barry, and we got your attention."

"Oh. What about the burglary charges?"

"I had them dropped."

She climbed up the steps and held onto the porch banister. "Hey, everyone!" she shouted as she beckoned, "won't you all come inside for refreshments?"

Barry stepped aside and watched the people herding into Miss Thurman's neat and clean house; he grinned big and almost sobbed.

END

The Shoreless Ocean of Eternity

Before the seas rose and covered much of the land, and before the Great Chaos overwhelmed civilization on Earth, the State of Israel in Exile devised a plan to prevent the breakdown from beginning to happen in the first place.

~

A man of medium height and dark, receding hair stood back from the door and looked up at the imposing edifice. The building was not particularly large, but it preserved memories of fear, death, and unthinkable horror. Not a prison, but containing the memory of prisons, the remembrances of prisoners. He put the keys into his pocket and said to the young woman beside him, "It's closed then."

The man, Edward Slepyan, and his fiancée Marisa Pavelich unlocked their bicycles and pushed them up the empty Wallenberg Place toward the National Mall in Washington. At the top of the incline, they mounted and peddled toward the bridge that would take them across the Potomac River to Arlington and their separate apartments.

Without explaining, Slepyan veered off the sidewalk. Under the shade of an elm tree, he dropped his bike and fell, face-downward. Marisa put her bike on the ground and sat beside him in the grass.

"I know what you're feeling," she said.

"My whole life's study, my life's work is closed," he said from the hollow space under his arm.

"You *were* the last member of the museum council to quit."

"It made no difference."

Just then an armored vehicle rumbled up, and from it approached a man wearing an open-collared, dark green shirt and dungarees. Slepyan sat up. Soldiers took positions around the vehicle, but the man advanced alone.

"Dr. Edward Slepyan," he said. "I need to talk with you."

"Who are you?"

The man smoothly crouched down on his haunches, his thigh and shoulder muscles pressing against his clothing. "My name is Colonel Weizman, and I represent the government of Israel. I heard about the museum, and that your university has been closed for some time. I have a job offer for you."

Weizman showed Slepyan his identification.

Slepyan glanced to Marisa for a clue about the sudden appearance of Weizman, but she just shrugged her shoulders. "Okay, I'm interested," he said.

"It involves travel, much travel, and time away from home. Much more than you're thinking. Before I explain, I must ask you a question."

At that moment an explosion boomed in the distance. No one flinched, though all looked in the direction of the sound.

Weizman resumed. "What if the Holocaust never happened?"

Slepyan scoffed. "Let's go, Marisa." He moved to take up his bicycle. "He's a lunatic."

"No, no. I'm sorry," Weizman said, rising to his feet. "I mean, what if you could *prevent* the Holocaust from happening? What if those millions of Jews, our people, had not been murdered? What if seeds of Shoah had not germinated again?"

"My people too, sir," Marisa interjected. "I've adopted them."

"I understand. Wouldn't the world be a better place? Think of the contributions to humanity the murdered could, would have made. In culture, the arts, in medicine and technology. Is it possible we could have saved the world from this looming darkness?"

Slepyan gave the man a penetrating look. "I have to answer these ridiculous questions to get this job?"

"Answers are the job."

Slepyan petted his stubbly beard. "Okay. This is absurd, but you'd have to change human nature, or travel back in time and intervene. Umm. Morally, we couldn't kill Hitler as a child. You'd have to stop him early in his career. That would be the simplest way, but simple is impossible."

"When exactly? When to stop Hitler?"

"The latest possible moment, but early enough to divert Germany's course. Early 1930s. How can reconstructing history save us?"

"One more question, Dr. Slepyan. Would you have consented to Hitler's assassination?"

"Yes, but he was supernaturally protected, it seems."

"Ah, supernaturally… I want you to watch this film. Take it home. Watch it with Ms. Pavelich. And will you meet me tomorrow at the Canadian embassy? That's where I'm staying. As you know, our embassy in D.C. was destroyed. Here's my card, and the movie. This is what we're prepared to pay you." He handed Slepyan a sealed envelope. "We can pick you up prior to noon."

"I think it's safe enough to ride."

"Then, Dr. Slepyan, arrive at noon, if you please. The embassy is on Pennsylvania intersecting Constitution. I'll meet you in the lobby. We'll have lunch. And do not talk about this with anyone."

"Can others watch the movie?" Marisa asked him.

"I don't care."

"Hey, I need to tell you something," Slepyan said.

"What is that?"

"My friends call me Eddie."

"Am I a friend?" Weizman asked, frowning.

"Can you call me Eddie?"

"I'm afraid not." Weizman turned and walked away.

Edward and Marisa watched him for a moment and then rode their bicycles past the untended, weedy, graffiti-marred FDR Memorial. Road traffic was light—mostly official governmental vehicles. Midway across the bridge, Marisa stopped, leaned her bike against the parapet, and gazed upriver. The smell was tolerable today because of a moderate breeze. If possible, the Potomac was higher than it had been in the morning. Within a month its stagnant marsh water would certainly rise above the pavement of the bridge.

"What are you doing?" Edward asked.

She opened the envelope from Weizman. "Here's an active draft upon the Defense Commissary for a month's rations. A gift."

"Couldn't be true."

She smiled and said, "We can get married now."

"Why?"

"Our offer is" [she was reading] "three years' support for two, upon acceptance of the contract, and, after successful or unsuccessful completion of the mission, a self-sustaining home in Colorado at or above 9,000 feet, with lifetime support, or 20 million dollars in gold… for you or your survivors."

~

In the evening they watched the movie at Marisa's penthouse apartment that she shared with five other single women—formerly professional women, since most were now unemployed. The apartment occupied two floors at the top of their building and overlooked the Potomac. In earlier days when it was standing, they would have seen the Washington Monument from their picture windows. The apartment featured a rooftop patio and 24-hour guard service for the entire building.

A few roommates and their boyfriends joined them. For supper Marisa prepared an elaborate hummus dip with paprika and whole chickpeas that she served with fresh-made flatbread. Edward brought some wine.

The movie told a variant of *The Time Machine*, by H.G. Wells. The producers crafted the film as if a documentary, but with well-known actors and the usual incredible special effects.

Scientists found that as the velocity of a space vessel pressed toward the theoretical speed limits of solid objects, the mass of the ship

actually reduced, which allowed the thrust to grow, making it possible to break the light barrier in a year of increasing acceleration.

The movie showed the UNSS *Ironcloud* expanding and transforming into photons, the process preserving the conceptual integrities of the ship and its living passengers. From an outside observer's perspective—of the audience—the ship appeared as an enormous, racing comet.

Exactly when the *Ironcloud* exceeded the speed of light, the engines seemed to stop, and the stars behind it vanished. The ship maintained this rate for six and a half minutes, and one-third of the crew disappeared without warning, without a sound. The remainder of the crew returned to Earth. Surprisingly, as they neared Earth and came within radio range, mission control asked no questions about the disappearances.

"Why no questions?" Edward mouthed.

When the captain and crew were taken to be debriefed, all but a handful of the missing members were waiting for them—they had somehow journeyed millions of miles unaided. Analysts supposed that the crew members had made their daydreams of home into reality. But when a crew member told that he appeared *before* he originally left Earth, the analysts realized that the wandering crew members had transcended time.

The unrecovered people had become lost in the universe.

At this point Edward whispered in Marisa's ear, "How does it relate to a job?"

"Shh!"

A crew now ventured to the past and tried to save the Earth, but all attempts failed, and the reason didn't emerge until they traveled far into the future where humans had split into two subspecies, one devolved into brutes and the other evolved into beings living in airships. There the sky people's historian explained a classic time travel paradox: altering the past to change an undesirable present invariably precluded the development of time travel.

When the film was over, everyone stood up and stretched. One of the boyfriends said, "Decent movie, but *we're* still trapped by the present. I feel worse now."

Edward and Marisa said nothing, as Weizman requested. They hugged, said goodnight, and Edward left.

~

The Embassy of Canada was surrounded by tanks and soldiers. Edward and Marisa locked their bicycles to a light pole as the homeless people sitting on nearby benches watched the activity around them. Weizman met the couple inside the initial security-check/reception area

and escorted them through. They rode the elevator to a passageway below ground and entered a conference room with a domed ceiling and walls filled with changing panoramas of Canada—silent moving images from Canadian history, natural landscapes, and urban skylines. Twenty-four seats were tucked around a large square table open in the middle. The table was set with fine dinner service and glasses.

"Straight to the point," Weizman said, "what do you like for lunch?"

Marisa said, "What do you have?"

Weizman spread his arms, his hands open. "Anything kosher. Everything. We're well stocked. We have greenhouses, too, for growing fruits and vegetables."

"Then I'll have salmon, grilled. Asparagus, steamed. Do you have asparagus? [Weizman smiled a yes.] A green salad with olive oil and vinegar, and boiled new potatoes, no butter, but sprinkled in fresh parsley. And fruit salad for dessert."

"The same," Edward said.

"And for drink," Weizman said, "may I suggest a Pinot Noir?"

"Perfect," Marisa said.

"Living well," Weizman said, "is the business of our meeting. The film you saw last night is not science fiction. The story is invented, of course, but the science is genuine. Humans who surpass light speed enter a state of being that enables them to travel across time. Dr. Slepyan, you know more about the Holocaust than anyone else alive. You know Hitler's life. We're sending an expedition into the past to change Hitler if we can: to alter his personality, to help him be healthy, or else to kill him. We need you as our guide."

Edward jumped up and walked around the room while gazing at the images. A mixture of anger and sadness darkened his face. He reached out and touched the wall.

"We're losing all the beauty," Weizman said. "Not only in Canada, but everywhere."

"Eddie doesn't believe you," Marisa said, suddenly tearful. "He doesn't understand why you're playing this elaborate game."

"Will you, Dr. Slepyan, will you accompany us on a three-year space voyage? You and Ms. Pavelich. You'll have to suspend your skepticism and come along for the ride. If you do nothing else, I guarantee the pay package."

"Even if you are lying about time travel?" Edward asked.

"Absolutely."

"May we think about it overnight?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Is there really even a spacecraft? Let's go, Marisa. I've heard

enough from this crazy liar." He moved toward the door, but she remained seated.

The light in the room dimmed as the scene around them changed to show a near object, with stars and Earth in the background, the Earth turning below, the object spinning swiftly. If it had been lying on a sandy beach in miniature, Edward and Marisa would have thought it a pointed, spiraled seashell.

"The UNSS *Chariot*," Weizman said. "That's a live image."

Edward sat down next to Marisa and took her hand.

Now they saw the inside of a comfortable home with wooden timbers and what looked like windows to a green forest outdoors. A woman was running a vacuum cleaner. She stopped the machine. "It's almost ready, sir."

"An onboard apartment, yours in fact," Weizman said.

The view moved into corridors and proceeded to tour other sections of the vessel, including areas of command and control.

"Okay," Edward said. "I've seen enough."

"Will you join us?" Weizman strangely emphasized the word "will."

The image transformed into one of stars, then the stars began swirling until they morphed into wooden barracks with bunks stacked three high. Emaciated, rag-clad men, some immobile, some shifting in slow motion, lay in rows on the bunks.

Edward's face grew pale as he gazed at the visual environment around him. "You removed one of my constructed videos from the museum." He seemed to be considering. Finally he asked, "What do you think, Marisa?"

"I will, if you will. We don't have any other prospects. But imagine, we'll experience pre-war Germany first hand, and if we succeed, save so many lives."

"Yes," Edward said. "If Weizman is telling the truth, if time travel exists, it's the ultimate opportunity for a historian—and to obliterate what he most loathes—it would be a kind of redemption, a validation."

"And yet I have a concern," Marisa said. "Preventing the Holocaust is a sufficient purpose, but there's no guarantee this will halt the collapse of civilization, as you said it will. Most of the murdered were ordinary people and not leaders and innovators."

Weizman looked at Edward. "Dr. Slepyan has already addressed this issue in full."

"I wrote a paper. Weizman and those backing this project are counting on the redeeming nature of the Jewish people, but there's more. Even if the rhetoric is different, most governments, such as they are, operate on principles developed by the Nazis. They studied, ap-

plied, and are improving upon Nazi methods. In other words, the Holocaust was a prototype, and we're presently seeing a full implementation. The widespread, systematic slaughter of the developing nations will be everywhere soon."

"So," Marisa said, "kill both Hitler and the advance of his immoral philosophy."

"That's our hope," Weizman said. "And our calculations rate a strong probability of success."

"How strong?" Edward asked.

"About 20%. It's the only chance we have."

After a long, silent pause, Edward said, "Okay. One requirement. We want to get married first. Right, sweetheart? [She nodded.] Right away at Marisa's apartment, with as many friends who can come. However, I don't know if Rabbi Schildel can officiate."

Marisa puckered her face in frustration.

Colonel Weizman glanced at his watch. "Returning to your homes will allow you to collect personal items. But you must be escorted there and back."

At that moment the walls and ceiling faded to white, the door to the conference room opened, and people began entering and taking seats around the table until all were filled. There was no time for introductions because servants began carrying in food for everyone, and wine. There was little conversation.

Edward whispered to Marisa, "Did you notice that everyone has what we ordered?"

"I did."

"I don't remember a waiter."

After a few minutes of quiet eating, Marisa said, "The food is good, but it could be better."

Weizman stood up. "Most of you know each other, but I'd like to introduce our newest members. We have Marisa Pavelich, who as you are aware, is a renowned chef. She has served in the White House and as a menu consultant for several museums. She also holds an advanced degree in dietetics."

Marisa nodded in acknowledgment.

"She's engaged to Dr. Edward Slepyan, former Chair of Holocaust Studies at Washington University. Dr. Slepyan pioneered the use of the Environment Quantum Computer as a tool for historical research."

Murmurs of satisfaction around the room.

"Anything either of you would like to say?"

Marisa braced, but did not otherwise move. Edward shook his head.

Weizman proceeded to introduce the others in the room—the

ship's senior officers, including Captain Therreal, the ship's physician and his assistant, the Israeli military contingent consisting of two Mossad agents and eight combatants, and the cook and his helper.

"The Reverend Sonya Kim is our chaplain. Rev. Kim is not only a theologian, but a recognized neurophysicist. She'll be our time-travel coach. Lastly, to her right we are honored to have the esteemed astro-engineer and nuclear physicist, Nobel Laureate, Ralf Pachero-Nanez. Dr. Pachero-Nanez—"

"Call me Ralf," a man said and stood up, showing his remarkable height. "At some later time, I'd like to discuss with you, Professor Slepyan, your research with the EQC."

Edward bowed.

"Okay," Weizman said. "Dr. Pachero-Nanez developed the theory and created the propulsion systems that enable us to transcend the light barrier. Without him, time-travel would never have been possible."

"Excuse me." Ralf waved his arms in annoyance. "Time *does not* exist, and therefore one cannot *travel* through time any more than waltz through the intangible concept of a clock. We simply will be transcending the material-energy universe, when—" Ralf faltered as the Rev. Kim tugged on his jacket. "My lovely wife will explain later."

"I neglected to mention that he and Rev. Kim though mature in years, recently married," Weizman said through a laugh politely echoed around the room.

Following that remark, Weizman adjourned the meeting. Marisa and Edward mingled until Weizman pulled them aside. "There will be plenty of *time* to get acquainted later. You have 18 hours for personal business, then you'll be shuttling to the ship at 0800 hours. Blessings to you on your wedding, and be sure to bring your recent research and notes. We already have your published material and the raw data from your EQC work in Germany."

"You have all that?"

"Yes. Yes, we do."

"I thought I knew all the locations of that data."

Weizman said nothing.

Motionless, Edward thought a short while then turned from Weizman. "Okay… Okay. Let's get married." He kissed Marisa on the lips.

~

Regrets about leaving and anxiety over the upcoming journey tempered the joy of the quickly arranged wedding. None of Eddie's or Marisa's parents or other relatives was able to attend. The guests comprised the crowd who watched the movie the evening before, additional friends, and former coworkers. The newlyweds spent the night in a private upper-floor suite at the Canadian embassy.

Weizman said the most difficult part of space travel for novices would be the initial, alarming shuttle ride to their ship, the UNSS *Chariot*, and this proved to be true if one discounted the boredom of the following year in a closed vessel with no wide terrestrial vistas, no weather, no change of seasons, no songs of birds and insects, no environmental variety whatsoever, and limited social contacts. Indeed, the *Chariot* became a prison, and the crew employed the coping mechanisms of prisoners throughout the ages: competitive games, intellectual pursuits, conversation, physical exercise, diverting food, dreams of escape or release, and, of course, work.

Only three notable situations occurred during the year of acceleration toward light speed. The first was that soon after the *Chariot's* departure, Marisa discovered she was pregnant—she and Eddie had taken preventative measures, but, alas, in the zeal of first intimacy, nature often thwarts and supersedes human intention.

The second notable situation was the friendship that grew between Eddie and Ralf Pachero-Nanez. They met at "the Park," as the crew called the common room featuring the same projection system as the Canadian embassy. It was the only place in the vessel that felt like an outdoor environment on Earth.

One day, Eddie and Ralf discussed the Environment Quantum Computer.

"Reading quantum flips in the material setting, classing them according to age by means of radioactive dating, processing them into cohesive data, and then coding the data into a visual/aural reproduction of historical events!" Ralf exclaimed. "Marvelous, Eddie! You would have to screen out so much, however—all the superfluous electromagnetism."

"I didn't develop the science, of course," Eddie said. "All I do—did—is give context to what we observed. We can pinpoint dates pretty close. We took quantum readers into Auschwitz, the preserved site, for example, and within a week, we had colorized images, and sounds, of actual events. Of unloading docks, of prisoner barracks, of the showers… We used these films at the Holocaust museum as an educational tool. They are tedious and slow, but all the more horrifying. We had scenes running 24 hours a day. Visitors stayed as long as they wished."

"It's almost time transcendence. The *Chariot* contains your quantum libraries from Germany and elsewhere? Marvelous."

"Only a fraction were ever interpreted and rendered into imagery," Eddie said.

"Certainly we brought every potential resource, because we'll never afford to make this expedition again. We'll need to improvise."

"Ralf, your passion is time travel—transcendence, that is—and yet

you focused on space."

"Speed, not space or time. My parents and grandparents were scientists. You know, my grandparents were born in Germany. I was a dreamer and read all the speculative fiction. But even the best time travel stories missed an essential factor. In order to travel through time, say from a particular place in the south of England, one must also travel in space. Why so? Because the island of Britain is always moving. It spins around as the Earth rotates. The Earth revolves around the sun. The solar system moves within the Milky Way. The Milky Way migrates within the Local Group. The Local Group races away from the theoretical center of the Universe."

Eddie stared at the simulated creation around him that had faded from the main street of his hometown into tree silhouettes on the horizon, and above, stars and swirly galaxies, the present becoming past and swiftly being left behind by an emergent present.

Eddie looked at Ralf with an inquiring expression.

"An illustration is always helpful," Ralf said, smiling.

"I'm trying to imagine a fixed point in the universe."

Ralf laughed. "Don't! If this ship were moving at the correct velocity and on the right trajectory, it might actually be standing still. We're like a sailing vessel on the ocean, affected by leeward drift and nearly imperceptible currents. I never took interest in space travel, because space is too cold or hot and it's void of life, and I never believed time travel as such was possible, but if it were possible, we'd have to reach great momentum. The discovery of time transcendence was accidental."

The door to the Park opened, and light streaming in spoiled the artificial night sky. Marisa and Sonya entered, Sonya carrying a biopolymer box. The door closed and Marisa looked up and said, "Lovely."

"I thought we'd join you for a late-night picnic," Sonya said. "Marisa and I assembled some food."

"What are we seeing now?" Marisa said, still looking up until she bumped into a chair.

"The view from our exact location, but without the gravity-simulating spin," Ralf said.

"And that location is?" Marisa asked.

"It doesn't really matter, does it?"

"Marisa can't cook anything not exquisite," Sonya said.

~

The third notable situation was the training that Sonya began midway into the voyage. Nearly everyone, including Weizman, attended the sessions. The Mossad agents and the combatants kept apart from

the others. They, apparently, had already prepared.

Sonya explained a fundamental aspect of time transcendence. “In the dream world your powers of thought and action are limited. Your mind floats along, flitting here and there, and you have negligible control over imaginary actions within the dream. Your body is all but immobile and paralyzed in bed. Consider that the supernatural world is to the natural world what the waking world is to the dream world. In the supernatural, you have incomparably more freedom and control over your mind and body than you do in your ordinary existence. When we cross over, when we accelerate past the light barrier, we will experience the true real.”

~

The birth of a son to Eddie and Marisa coincided with the beginning of the vessel’s conversion from matter into photonic energy. Marisa urged Eddie to name him Itai, and Eddie said, “Then, his name is Itai.”

The couple found it difficult to distinguish between their elation with their child and an acute, exhilarating awareness of reality that came to them gradually during the final three months of acceleration. Marisa described it by saying, “It’s like I’m waking up slowly, rising from deep muddy water into consciousness.”

Sonya assured the parents that their baby would transcend time with them, he being subject to their will and love.

~

During the final formal time-training session in the Park, Sonya summarized the essentials to the assembled expedition members.

“We cannot overemphasize how important it is that, once we penetrate the light barrier, you focus. We cannot afford to lose anyone. Your will, the switch within you, propels you across times. We’ve practiced synchronizing our wills from the beginning of this program through consensus and submission exercises. Focus. We must will together to move the ship with us. As we all move ourselves simultaneously into 1933 at a specific date and precise time and location in orbit, we’ll carry the *Chariot* along. Minus the *Chariot,* we’ll be stranded, obviously, or worse, emerge in vacuous space. As I have said, if our intention is to arrive precisely together, it will be so.”

“A question,” Eddie said. “I thought there was a separate team, one attempting to influence Hitler in his youth, to save him from his mania. What happened to this plan?”

Weizman stood up. “I’m afraid we abandoned it. The outcomes are too uncertain.”

Ralf gave a sudden start that caught everyone’s attention, and Eddie and Marisa both felt bewildered.

Sonya continued as if there had been no interruption. “Each of you will experience Infinity differently, likely in a metaphor dear to you. I see it as a grand cathedral. You must start visualizing it now, so you won’t be surprised. Some of you… Captain Therreal, you haven’t told me what your metaphor is.”

“A wilderness trout stream,” he said, and everyone laughed on top of him saying, “Fishing is paradise.”

As mirth subsided, Sonya said, “A traveler will see each imagined time or world as from a distance, and go there, if he or she wishes, but it takes experience to navigate, and that’s beyond your purpose. We may be in the realm of Infinity for only a heartbeat. Once we are in, you’ll move out quickly. I won’t be passing into 1933 with you. I’ll remain inside Infinity as a medium, a link with our present.” She looked around the room. “Any questions?”

Marisa spoke up. “Is there additional personal preparation to make?”

Sonya seemed lost in thought and then recollected herself. “Sorry. No. God is light; in him is no darkness. The supernatural world is like the natural one—you’ll get along in one much the same as in the other, no special moral qualities required, although there are profound consequences for each action and idea, for good or evil.

“But not everyone is fit for climbing a Himalayan peak or swimming the English Channel, and Infinity has its own challenges. As your escort I’m your protector, and that’s sufficient. Alright. If there’s nothing else, this concludes our formal training. If you haven’t yet, you must memorize our destination coordinates and you *will* be tested on them under stress conditions.”

As people filed from the room, Sonya said over Colonel Weizman’s shoulder, “I suggested that the commandos attend our summary session today. Why weren’t they here?”

Weizman turned to her and did not speak.

“And what about the scuttled plan to save Hitler?”

He walked away.

~

One afternoon Eddie fell asleep over his keyboard, which caused him to arrive late for his regular meeting with Ralf at the Park. When the Park’s door slid open, he heard for an instant a loud voice shouting in German. Ralf and Weizman were standing face to face, both in an immobile attitude of suppressed anger. Weizman glanced at Eddie and left the room. Ralf collapsed into a chair.

“What was that about?” Eddie said.

“An argument.”

“Did I hear ‘abscheulicher? Abomination?”

"Perhaps you did," Ralf said wearily.

"I never thought Weizman liked you."

"Does he like anyone? The only reason I'm on this mission, Eddie, my friend, is to maintain the propulsion."

"Yes, I suppose so." Eddie pulled up a chair, settled into it, and spoke in the tone of friendly debate customary between them. "Recently I've been reading your philosophical works. Your ideas about human free will seem contradictory. You write that it's a mechanism that gave humans an evolutionary advantage, and then you say that will, like time, doesn't exist—but only the appearance of will—it's an illusion. And you also write that human will is the one true moral value, the one that gives dignity to human beings. The singular characteristic of a person, you say, is the ability to make and enforce decisions. I thought you might provide an explanation for the apparent contradictions."

Ralf had been scowling and he leaped from his chair. "Forgive me," he said. "I'm upset and fatigued. I don't think we can talk today. But, I look forward to next time. Excuse me." And with that, he left the Park.

~

As they approached light speed, Eddie and Marisa noticed how every sensation, emotion, and thought became deeper, more intense, more brilliant. Each word they uttered suggested not only an entire spectrum of meanings and relationships with other words and the history of words, but concepts that felt more tangible than the objective item they represented. When they said "child," the idea almost became an actuality they could touch and hold. Speech between them became so substantial that it was as unbearable as it was unnecessary, so they gave it up. They also gave up eating and drinking, as there was no need.

They waited and it wasn't waiting, but only watching, listening, and thinking. Sonya called all the crew into the Park. Everyone was present, reclining in comfortable chairs, Eddie's arm around Marisa as she cuddled Itai. Each person experienced an instant of illumination, of clarity, recognition and infinite vision, of awe and fear, of agonizing pleasure and pain, of ecstasy and despair. Sonya cried out, "Now!" and the next thing they knew, the *Chariot* seemed to be dim and motionless.

"Well," Ralf said, "is anyone missing?" He skipped around the room. "No? Is baby Itai here? Good!"

Each person exhibited a unique look of shock.

"We made it," Ralf said. "We're in orbit around planet Earth and the date is… November 2, 1933. Congratulations, everyone."

"It's normal to be depressed afterwards," Sonya said, standing in their midst, and she seemed to shimmer.

~

The Mossad agents took the shuttle to the surface and bought a neglected farm outside a village north of Essen, Germany, and when they settled the transaction, the core of the travelers moved into the farm's large house. Captain Therreal and a skeleton crew quartered aboard the *Chariot* and rotated down periodically. The agents and half the combatants fanned out over Europe to contact the future prospective leaders of Israel in Exile to ensure that they pursued the time transcendence project even if the Holocaust never happened. Sonya's ghost or spirit appeared from time to time.

Marisa and Eddie supervised the household and farm activities, the latter of which, except for Ralf's vegetable garden, they conducted minimally for appearances. Eddie set up a laboratory in the basement and continued analyzing EQC readings.

They reveled in the gentle environment of Earth, with its brisk, bright winter; with winds, rain, and soft sunlight, a relief from their stark abode during the previous year and compared to the polluted, decaying world they left behind. They enjoyed watching their baby boy grow. Weizman monitored everyone's activities and restricted travel away from the farm, but otherwise Marisa and Eddie relished their peaceful day-by-day months of simple enjoyment and labor.

"If we aren't successful in preventing the Holocaust, I don't want to return to our own time—not with Itai," Marisa said early one spring morning as they strolled in the woods behind the barns. "Let's go someplace quiet and safe here."

~

Weizman, Ralf, and Eddie had concluded that the best time to eliminate Chancellor Hitler would be during the summer of 1934, prior to the September Nuremberg rally that initiated the strongest flourish yet of Nazi Socialism. With Hitler dead, the influential propaganda film, Triumph des Willens, would never be made. German President Hindenburg, though ill, would still be alive and representing the old, more civil order; and the Nazis had not yet seized total control of Germany.

By means of the EQC technicians' research, Eddie determined the precise moment and place when Hitler should be killed and the sniper team could safely egress. On June 28, Hitler would be at a wedding reception at the Hotel Vereinshaus in Essen. On that day, before the "Night of Long Knives," Hitler's paranoia about German political rivals and Ernst Röhm of the SA, the Brownshirts, had risen to such a pitch and was so infective that the assassination would not provoke anti-Semite reprisals.

On the given morning, the combatants left from the farmhouse

wearing ordinary street clothing and carrying two suitcases. Later, in the afternoon, Eddie, Marisa, Ralf and the others gathered in the parlor and listened to the radio, expecting news of Hitler's death to come across the airwaves soon after an effective result. Captain Therreal joined them.

Deep into the evening, and the big band music seemed as if it would never end. Eddie played with the baby on the floor. Ralf played chess against himself. A fire burned low on the hearth. At some point Captain Therreal looked up from the book he was reading. "Did you notice the music skip backwards?"

"You fell asleep," Eddie said.

Marisa entered the room carrying pitchers of beer.

"Let me help," Eddie said from the floor.

"Tray of mugs in the kitchen. You know, I felt dizzy in the keg room. It was weird."

"Go to bed."

"No, I'm fine. Whoa, there it is again."

Everyone had felt the skip this time.

"Earthquake?" Ralf said with unusual irony for him.

~

Not long after midnight, Colonel Weizman and his team drove up to the farm in their panel trucks. The combatants retired to their quarters in a remodeled barn, and Weizman wearily climbed the steps to the farmhouse and sank onto a sofa before a cheerless, cold fireplace.

They waited for him to speak.

He shook his head, saying the operation had failed. "Everything went smoothly. No one at the nightclub across the park from Hotel Vereinshaus suspected that we weren't businessmen waiting for a train. The sniper team and I were stationed on the roof of the nightclub's building. Hitler stepped onto the hotel balcony for a breath of fresh air, as we predicted. He was drinking tea. Our man had him in his sights. 400 meters. Range, elevation, windage on his scope—all correct. The spotter accounted for the breeze. The sniper squeezed the trigger and the weapon fired. We felt the pressure of the cartridge's explosion. Head shot. We saw the target jerk and…"

"Then what?" Captain Therreal said.

"It was as if the weapon had not fired."

"What do you mean?"

"The weapon had not fired."

"How can that be?" Eddie said.

"It just was. Hitler held a teacup, just as before. I ordered for our spotter to check the figures, and our man fired again with the same result. We saw the target react, and the next instant all was as if it had

never happened. The cartridge was intact—the bullet never left the chamber."

Weizman scooted to the edge of the couch and continued.

"By then Hitler had re-entered the hotel ballroom and we shot through the massive window, with identical results but more obvious, since the bullet shattered the glass, which, the next instant was undamaged. Afterward, there was no other opportunity."

Everyone stared blankly, lost in devastation—or denial—that the mission so essential for the survival of civilization, and so heavily financed and outfitted, and so meticulously prepared should progress so far and then fail at the critical moment, in the final small action.

"Hitler's survival is required for the discovery of time transcendence," Eddie said, trying to focus the group. "That's the only conclusion possible. He's not only responsible for the Holocaust, which is a provocateur of time transcendence, but the person Adolf Hitler himself is an origin."

"Or his descendant," Weizman said and eyed Ralf. "Why hasn't our brilliant scientist spoken?"

"Eddie's reasoning is intuitive," Ralf said, ignoring the inexplicable insult, "but transcendence theory isn't straightforward. Its paradoxes and contradictions are incoherent, not because it's too complex, but incoherent in essence. We're operating outside of the cause and effect universe. The laws within Infinity, or more properly, Eternity, may be random."

"Which is to say, what?" Weizman asked.

"There might be another explanation," Ralf said.

"And that would be?" Weizman said.

Ralf didn't answer.

"Divine Providence," Marisa offered. "A will superior to ours. Anyhow, Adolf Hitler didn't father any offspring."

"We could investigate that," Eddie said.

"Trample a butterfly and modify the cosmos," Ralf said. "In whatever way Hitler affects time transcendence, it's certain what you witnessed, Colonel Weizman, is a causal loop. The rifleman pulled the trigger: Hitler was killed and that revised the course of history so that time transcendence never occurred. If it never occurred, then we never crossed time and Hitler was never killed, which means that time transcendence could occur, which means we did appear here in 1933 and we did set up the assassination and our sniper placed his finger on the trigger."

"All that happened in a moment?" Marisa said.

"Perhaps," Ralf said, "and it appeared as if everything reset to the instant prior to the shot."

"That's the skip we felt," Marisa said. "What should we do next?"

"We could find a child born to Hitler," Eddie said.

"That won't prevent the Holocaust." Weizman leaned back against a couch pillow and closed his eyes. "We have a backup plan. The mission has changed. We can't kill Hitler, but we can annihilate as many high-ranking Nazis as possible, and it may weaken Hitler enough that he won't execute his 'final solution.'" He looked at Ralf. "Only Rev. Kim can tell us if we accomplish our goal."

"I expect her this evening, or by morning," Ralf said.

Marisa appeared to be listening for the baby who was sleeping upstairs. When the room fell silent except for the clock ticking on the mantelpiece, she said, "You all agreed that killing Hitler was the least disturbing action having the best result, right? Why should we give up? What if he produced a child instrumental to time transcendence, but in the next couple years? They didn't establish the ghettos until when?"

"The first one, 1939," Eddie said.

"Hitler had—has—a powerful effect on the German people," Ralf said. "His mere existence might inspire the difference."

They all were quiet for a minute and the cook's helper brought in soup, bread, and wine for Weizman.

He heartily ate a few mouthfuls and then said, "We could talk forever. Dr. Slepyan, please research the Hitler offspring idea. If we find a family link between Der Führer and time transcendence—it's the most easily discoverable of the multitude of factors, isn't it?—then we proceed with killing Nazis for the present and endeavor not to disturb that linkage."

"Producing his own children never crossed Hitler's mind," Eddie said. "He was, in his perverse thinking, the father of all Germans."

~

Possible offspring of Adolf Hitler were *not* so easily discoverable. While Hitler was alleged to have had half a dozen affairs, two women appeared on the off-the-cuff high-probable list as mothers: Eva Braun, of course, and the British devotee, Unity Mitford. Eddie dismissed both of them as possibilities. Enough about them was known that they couldn't have concealed a pregnancy. If this person existed at all, it had to be someone hitherto unsuspected—a female secretary or a simple admirer. There were numerous women who might have been honored to serve a peculiar request of his, though it would be out of his character to engage in sexual activity with them. He was fastidious, Eddie thought. He married Eva Braun.

Eddie spent hours thinking about how to narrow down the search. While they possessed vast amounts of data recorded in a multitude of locations over long periods of time, it nevertheless included only a

fraction of the totality of Hitler's life. They might not have the needed information at all.

He and Weizman set up parameters for an exhaustive data search. Much of the raw, unprocessed EQC material had been cataloged and coupled with all pertinent information on the Third Reich. The critical factors were person, place, and timeframe. With little hope of success, Eddie set the search in motion and asked the technicians to inform him if anything significant came up. Days passed while the computers plodded along, seemingly in slow motion, while in fact they were processing at lightning speed. Eddie quite forgot about the search. Indeed, in the pleasant daily routines of family chores, the entire mission faded into the background, until one evening in early September when a cool breeze foretold fall and approaching winter.

A tech ran up to him as he was rinsing soil from the garden implements he had been working with long after sunset. "The computers are done, Dr. Slepyan."

He hurried to the workroom in the basement. Marisa, Weizman and a few of the Mossad fighters had gathered—a small, tense crowd. The tech beamed, relishing the drama. With an all-but-imperceptible flourish, he hit a single key and the screen opened to reveal a list of names, followed by places, timeframes, and percentages. The list filled the page; it filled three whole pages.

Eddie read the first two entries out loud. "1. Traudl Junge, Berlin Chancellery, April 1945. Match: 87.2%. Junge was his personal secretary. 2. Hanna Reitsch, Berghof, June 1944 or Berlin Chancellery, April 1945. Match: 83%."

He accessed the referencing material and summarized it out loud: "Reitsch and von Greim spent three days with Hitler at the Berghof on the occasion of Eva Braun's sister's wedding. Reitsch at that time said, 'The Führer must live so that Germany can live. The people demand it.' She was 32 years old. Hitler gave her and von Greim poison capsules in the remote chance of defeat and ordered that they mount a commemorative Luftwaffe bombing of Russian Soviet forces. He also requested for von Greim to keep secret watches on Himmler and Goering, both of whom Hitler suspected of disloyalty. General von Greim committed suicide about a year later. Hanna Reitsch died in 1979."

Eddie jumped up. "Let's start. Reitsch first."

Marisa groaned. "I'm going to bed. I've got a baby to nurse."

"If Reitsch bore a child," Eddie muttered to himself, "she must have given it up for adoption."

~

Eddie and the two EQC technicians worked through what remained of the night in the basement laboratory, Eddie catnapping on a cot

while the computer filtered data and processed images. Not long after daybreak, the male technician said, "I've got something, Dr. Slepyan."

Eddie sat up from the cot in a mental fog and said only, "Oh."

"The Park would be better to see, but… Plenty of love making at the Berghof—one duet in a closet… Quite a social scene. We've not seen Hitler with anyone other than Eva. But what's this? Hitler is now on our monitor. He's alone."

Eddie stood up, and—with an unconscious grimace—watched over the tech's shoulder. The scene concluded and he said, "You don't want this in the Park. When did they develop artificial insemination?"

The tech in a rolling chair flung himself the short distance to a general-use computer. "In practice, the late 1940s," he said. "Semen storage, a limiting factor."

"Find out, will you? Who receives Hitler's semen?"

"Yes, sir."

Eddie paced up and down the floor. Marisa descended the stairs carrying a basket of fresh-baked cinnamon buns and a pot of coffee. The female tech on her cot yawned and stretched.

"Good morning, dear," Eddie said to Marisa. "You look lovely."

"You're crumpled," she said and poured him a cup.

He bit into one of the sweet buns.

"No. No thanks, I'm not hungry," the male tech said to Marisa's offer of a bun.

The female tech said, "I'm going upstairs for a bath."

Just as she left, Weizman came down appearing worn, as if he, too, had slept little; he observed awhile and left without saying a word.

"Okay," the tech said. "Hitler handed the vial to a nurse, then a woman took it, and… she applied it to herself with a syringe-like device in a bathroom."

"You're quick," Eddie said.

"Do you want to see the images?"

Weizman must have been waiting at the top of the stairs because he noisily clattered down and glared at the EQC monitor. A male combatant followed him and stood back.

"Let me see her face," Eddie said and waited. "Oh God, I was right. Hanna Reitsch. Though it's not proof a child ensued. We'd need to run her and Hitler's DNA, and then search our entire records, if not the population." He sighed. "It will take months to collect samples. And—"

"Not months, Slepyan," Weizman said, "Not months, but years for us to exhume Nazi war criminals and significant sympathizers, so we have Fräulein Reitsch on record. Hitler's DNA we've collected since we arrived. June of 1944 is too late to prevent the Holocaust, and early

enough to limit its effect, but…"

He nodded to the combatant, who left by a door that led to concrete steps against a retaining wall up to ground level outside. "We also ran Herr Pachero-Nanez's DNA overnight and believe he's the great-grandson of Adolf Hitler."

"I'm speechless," Eddie said.

"What you found, Dr. Slepyan, settles the matter." Weizman's eyes burned with an intense fire.

A long, taut half-minute passed with no one speaking, and then a muffled "pop" came from outside.

Eddie strode to the door, opened it, and climbed the steps. Weizman and the technician followed him. Marisa and crew members were standing on the back porch and looking toward the tree line where combatants, a man and a woman in farmer clothing, were shoveling.

Marisa said, "We heard the gunshot, too."

Eddie ran over. The combatants kept shoveling as Eddie gaped down into the deep trench. Still exposed in the dirt, a hand, an arm in a jacket sleeve, and the jacket's shoulder. Soil partly hid a lumpish black bag.

"Who is it? What happened?" Eddie's voice trembled.

Weizman now reached the trench. "The Führer and his followers massacred not only millions of Jews, they destroyed generations of future descendants. We killed Hitler's sole descendant. The ledger is a bit more balanced."

"Ralf? You murdered Ralf? Oh, my God." Eddie sank to the ground and eased into the trench. He struggled with the black bag and undid the knot to see Ralf's face and damaged head, the soil beneath viscous with blood. Eddie looked up to Weizman. "What are you?" he said fiercely.

"We are men and women, progeny of Shoah survivors," a female combatant wearing camouflage fatigues said. A beauty, she had dark, reddish hair. "You, historian, must teach the world that tyrants will suffer the fate they inflict on others, they will lose all they hold dear. What we have done is a warning."

Suddenly tender, heartbroken, Eddie spoke to her in Hebrew. "All these months, our sister, and no one told me your name."

She stiffened and looked away.

"She won't disobey my silence order again," Weizman said. "Her name is Talia Hirsch. Her family's vineyard will soon be flooded in our present."

"You, Colonel, you are evil," Eddie said coldly and crawled from the trench.

"Evil begets evil."

"And evil begets evil forever and ever."

"There's more you should know," Weizman said. "Pachero-Nanez planned to give nuclear secrets to the Nazis. His computers contained formulas and schematics for an elementary neutron bomb. With it, the Germans could conquer the whole world."

"Ralf would never have done that. You know it."

"We don't. Hanna Reitsch was a loyal Nazi to the end of her life. Her only regret about the war was that Germany never invaded North America. Pachero-Nanez would have fulfilled the demands of his legacy."

"He only wanted to explore humanity," Eddie said. "He was a child. Our humanity is a greater kinship than blood, than family, than our Jewishness, or Aryanness. And you, you've lost your humanity. The best people are murdered by the worst, and the worst end up killing each other."

"Well…" Weizman said.

"This is my final word to you, Colonel. Repent."

Eddie stumbled light-headed toward the farmhouse where Marisa and the others had been held back by combatants. Weizman benignly watched him for a few moments.

"Pack in the dirt and scatter the overflow in the woods," Weizman ordered. "Conceal the scar."

A wail rose up from the direction of the house.

~

Filled with anger, Eddie hoped to convince Captain Therreal to arrest and confine Weizman. He first embraced Marisa until she ceased shuddering, then he went to find Therreal, who was tinkering with the shuttle concealed in an outbuilding.

Therreal set his palm computer on a counter. "I'm appalled…" With Eddie following him, he walked outside and gazed toward the farmhouse. "Plucky as they are, my crew fighting these combatants? No. Off-ship, Weizman is autonomous. Since he and his commandos don't plan to return to the 21st century, indeed don't intend to board the *Chariot* again, regrettably, there's nothing I can do. Weizman offloaded his gold and supplies long ago. I liked Ralf. How is Sonya?"

"We haven't seen her," Eddie said. "Do you believe Ralf would give nuclear technology to the Nazis?"

"No."

Eddie left the outbuilding and went up to his room.

"Hello… dear," Marisa said weakly. Her countenance was contorted with grief and fury as she played with the giggling baby. "Sonya came to me. She wants to talk, but not in the house. In the woods, in an hour."

"You told her about Ralf, that Weizman murdered him? How is she?"

"Hard to say."

A light knock at the door. Eddie went to see. It was Weizman. Eddie stepped into the hallway and closed the door behind him.

"You probably won't speak to me," Weizman said.

Eddie didn't move.

"Okay, that's fine," Weizman said. "The official project is ended. My plan now is to engage in guerrilla warfare against the Nazis. If we can't stop the Holocaust, we'll warn Jews to escape to the United States or Canada, or at least to avoid the ghettos. We will aid rescuers. Later we'll organize partisan forces and attack the death camps. With knowledge of events and our superior weapons, we'll have considerable effect in killing guards, disrupting camp operations, and liberating prisoners.

"You and your family are free to return to the *Chariot*. Once you enter time transcendence, you may go anywhere in the universe. It's only a suggestion—but I hope you'll stay here. You'd be invaluable in helping the American and Allied Forces. Convince them to make preventing the genocide a priority. Advise them on military strategy. After the war—if there is a war—you may settle down wherever you like. This is a much nicer world than what we left. I'll give you enough gold—your pay, in fact—to be comfortable. Therreal said the *Chariot* departs in two days." Weizman said no more, but studied Eddie expectantly.

"I'll consider it." Eddie backed into their room and shut the door.

"I heard," Marisa said, picking up an umbrella. "We should meet Sonya now. It might rain."

They slipped baby Itai into his coat and walked past the combatant quarters and across the field to the invisible grave where Ralf was buried.

Marisa crossed herself and said a silent prayer, and then they took a trail that led to a grotto beside a creek with a curving, clear waterfall that dropped into a bubbly pool. Late-season wildflowers, purple and yellow, grew in abundance in the soft turf. Marisa and Eddie sat on the rocks as the baby slept in Eddie's arms. Beams of sunlight cut down through the trees and suddenly Sonya stood before them. Though the air was still and quiet, she appeared to be leaning against a strong wind that whipped her hair around her face.

Marisa moved as if to give her a hug, but Sonya stopped her with a gesture and said in a strained, aloof voice, "The world is no better because of Weizman's actions."

"I'm so sorry about Ralf," Marisa said.

"I searched for him throughout the Cathedral," Sonya said, "but he's far away. He followed the wrong path."

As Marisa and Eddie stared, the buffeted, iridescent Sonya transfigured into a being of dull flesh and blood, and she screamed and collapsed onto the ground.

Trembling, Marisa knelt beside her and folded the baby's blanket under her head. "She's so young and so old, both."

Sonya opened her eyes and said feebly, "Shock of this corrupted realm. There's a plague on this sphere, a weight of sin. How do you endure the burden? Gravity… Muscles weak. My bones thin. I've been absent… too long."

"Get the doctor," Marisa cried. "Bring something to drink from the icebox."

Eddie jumped up and ran to find the doctor, who grabbed his medical bag. Eddie snatched a pitcher of juice and told a grim combatant to bring a stretcher.

When they reached the grotto, Marisa looked up with sad eyes and shook her head. "She didn't last at all."

The doctor confirmed she was gone. More combatants arrived and gently placed Sonya's body on the stretcher.

"Bury her beside her husband," Marisa said as the combatants bore the stretcher away, the doctor shadowing the procession.

A gloomy cloud mass had been creeping up, bringing with it a sudden gusty breeze. "Rain showers soon, maybe," Marisa said.

Now awake, the baby demanded a diaper change.

"Pear juice?" Eddie asked when Itai was fresh.

"Yes, please," she said, rinsing her hands in the stream.

They sat again on the rocks and shared the pitcher back and forth.

"We should have accompanied the body," Eddie said.

"I want to talk first."

Eddie sighed. "Sonya was an angel."

"She was a human being with an angelic existence. Remember the science-fiction film we saw before our wedding? The ending?"

"Sky dwellers in the future?"

Neither spoke for a time. The waterfall seemed to grow louder and oppress them, but it was the weight of loss they felt. The sky was growing darker. The baby waved a bare stick he had found.

"People live in solar-powered dirigibles," Marisa said at last. "Twelve hundred years from now they're dying out because they're not having enough children anymore—the women are dying young. But, it's a beautiful way to live, drifting with the clouds. The world is clean. The air and water are pure again."

"Weizman said the movie's story was fiction."

"*Weizman*," she said with contempt. "It's real. Sonya visited there years ago and told me. Before we crossed the light barrier, she taught me a little about navigating. I want to live in that time and place."

"What about helping here, in this past?"

"Edward, my love, the role of a historian is to remember the past."

"I suppose we could leave a letter and our gold for… for Raphael Lemkin. A heroic anti-genocide campaigner. Polish. Jewish. All his relatives were, will be murdered by the Nazis. He saw the Holocaust coming."

"Sonya said young people in that distant future fly gliders, high-altitude gliders for sport; I remember now… she said that Ralf's 'Oma Reitsch' would love this."

Eddie thought for a moment. "So, Ralf knew all along about his monstrous ancestor. Hanna Reitsch set gliding records."

They watched the baby attempt to pull up and stand.

"I'm tired." Eddie rubbed his hands over his face. Marisa massaged the back of his neck. "Feels good," he said. "Oh, I can't." He drew in a deep breath and exhaled in a gust. "We can't leave this time period. We can't run away."

"I know. We were daydreaming."

Eddie unconsciously crossed an arm across his belly and propped the opposite elbow on the arm, pressing his fist to his mouth. He stared ahead, searching his memory. "If we can't eliminate Hitler," he said, thinking out loud, "what other simple change might alter history for the better? What if the U.S. had developed the atom bomb earlier? What if we actually deployed it?"

"Oh, Eddie. That's so risky. We're not the right people to make that decision."

"But people are alive who might be. What if the isolationist Robert Taft had not been elected president in 1940? What if FDR had won an unprecedented third term? I believe Roosevelt would have pushed to declare war against Japan after the invasion of Pearl Harbor. All Taft did was stage symbolic attempts to retake it and his old home, the Philippines."

"Would Franklin Roosevelt rally the American people?"

"He proclaimed he'd never send American sons into foreign wars, but he actually prepared for war by supporting the draft, for example. He gave ships and weaponry to England. And if the U.S. had entered the war, Japan probably wouldn't have conquered and held most of the Pacific Rim. Germany wouldn't have kept North Africa, half of the Soviet Union, and every bit of Europe and the British Isles."

"So, do we join Roosevelt's reelection campaign?" She picked up the baby and began making faces at him. He pointed upward and said,

"Look, look."

Eddie was silent while leaves rustled overhead and the tree branches swayed in irregular rhythm. At last he spoke. "We need to stop Taft from winning the Republican nomination in 1940. And if instead, Wendell Willkie, who like Roosevelt was an interventionist, takes the nomination, Roosevelt would be bolder in his campaign. He'd likely win an electoral landslide in November."

"So, it's settled."

"We might be able to keep the Third Reich from spreading across the world and murdering 15 million of our people by the time it collapsed in 2004."

"If we're staying here," Marisa said, "we should send letters with the *Chariot* to our family members."

"And pictures of the baby."

He took the baby from Marisa and gazed at his grinning face. "It struck me just now… I know it, but I never felt it so sharply; after what happened this morning and yesterday… Itai is not merely our baby, he's a person. A numinous person."

"I've always felt it," Marisa said.

Eddie somberly kissed Itai on a fat cheek. "Let's give our respect to Sonya and begin packing."

Just then the breeze shifted and they heard noises rattling from the direction of the farmhouse. Gunfire. A broken, black column expanded over the trees, showing them the house's exact position, and then they smelled smoke. A flash lit the sky and thunder rumbled overhead.

"Hallo," a female voice called. Talia Hirsch ran up arrayed for battle, an autocarbine slung from her neck and cradled to her chest. "We're under attack," she said. "We've been betrayed." She breathed twice in a quick pause and said with intense calmness, "The Colonel says you must go to the outbuilding immediately to be evacuated via the shuttle. He says, 'Shalom.'" At that, she turned and trotted away.

"Wait!" Eddie said.

She stopped.

"How safe is it?"

"We're holding the house until it burns—to destroy your records and computers. We'll cover your launch. Hurry. Therreal is impatient."

"Talia, why don't you come with us? How will you survive?"

She swooped down to pick a purple wildflower, smiled, and said, "Don't be afraid on my behalf. Someone in Eternity is fighting for us." She tucked the flower's stem into a shirt pocket. "You must hurry now."

END

When Earth Whispers (jtb 3)

During the first seconds of last spring's devastating earthquake in Lynchville, California, some people believed they had fallen ill, some assumed they had been struck by lightning, some thought trucks had rammed their houses. Those living adjacent to railroad tracks wondered if a train had derailed nearby.

I was praying in my study at the church early Sunday morning. As the furniture jerked back and forth and books tumbled through the air, it occurred to me that the world might be ending and I would die. When the shaking stopped, I picked myself up and limped through the wreckage.

Outdoors, nothing seemed different until I noticed an asphalt-topped plane of our new parking lot like a frozen wave, jutting twenty feet high and sloping sharply below ground level. As I walked closer, I could see deep into the crack. I looked around at the sky. Birds had begun singing again and the sunlight streaming below a cloudbank threw everything into high contrast, shadow and light.

❍

As violent as the earthquake had been, injuries were few and damage isolated. The following day the sky cleared, leaving nothing between us and the brilliant sun but a crystalline pure atmosphere. Each morning, the green eastern hills radiated with an aura of excruciating intensity. I thought my vision was impaired, like when the optometrist dilates your pupils for an exam, only this felt permanent.

Within a week, the trembler had become an inconsequential curiosity for our church members, excepting the anticipated cost of parking lot repair. Life for me returned to normal: that is, until a Mr. Barron made a blind appointment to meet me at my restored study. He was tall, beardless, in his mid-thirties, and a trifle overweight.

"Pastor Taylor, you may have heard of me, Jonathan T. Barron."

"I don't guess I have."

"I'm a paranormal researcher. I investigate the strange. Haunted houses, demonic possession, body snatching, premature burials, cannibalism and vampires, apparitions, ritual sacrifices, floating lights, UFOs. All that."

"Okay."

"I produce a weekly nationally syndicated show called Strange Days Radio. I have a large following and I've been on television and I wrote several books. I live in Lynchville."

"Interesting."

Jonathan T. Barron looked at me with skepticism. "Pastor Taylor,

people take this stuff seriously. I usually talk about ordinary legend or folklore, and I'm the first to expose frauds, hoaxes, and plain lies. Much of what I find has natural causes. I'm a debunker more than a believer. But things happen—documented, measured events, macabre and weird incidents defying explanation, that contradict everything we know."

"Miracles."

Barron shook his head. "Most contradictions I see are bad."

"What do you need from me, Mr. Barron?"

"The earthquake was specific, Pastor Taylor. Seismologists and engineers can't explain how quake-resistant buildings were leveled and old buildings next door were left untouched. I need the history of your parking lot."

"A house once stood there," I said. "We used it for missionaries on furlough. Our church grew, and we needed parking, so we tore it down last year. The house was built early in the last century."

"Any strange reports?"

"Not that I know of. But I've been at this church only for— We took the position when our daughter started college. What are you looking for, exactly?"

Barron sighed and massaged his temples. "I've had calls and letters from all around Lynchville, but also from people in your church."

"Our church? And the nature of the contacts?"

"Narratives of nightmares, squeaking sounds in the dark, cats throwing up, smears of blood left on lawn furniture and window sills. Police are DNA testing the blood."

"Oh Lord, you're a sensationalist."

"You know that I'm not. I want you to help me, Pastor Taylor. May I photograph your parking lot?"

"Take your pictures," I said. "But that's all."

Pastors are often last to learn about problems in their congregations, and so I wouldn't have been surprised if no one had told me about any freaky occurrences. I put a vague notice in the church bulletin. Of our 700 members, a dozen contacted me. I must say, people weren't candid, they only wanted the uncanny events to stop. Just one person confessed anything, and it was an abortion she regretted from when she was a college student.

"Tell me if your nightmares don't stop," I said.

"There's more than nightmares. I hear screaming in my dreams and I wake up. I think it's me screaming, but then I hear a tiny baby crying outside."

Local television news reported that neighbors in one community began to worry about a particular family—the mother was neglecting her children. When Child Protective Services arrived, they found the three young children malnourished and filthy, the house a pigsty, the woman lying on her bed, numb to the world. One isolated incident like this wouldn't have been so unusual, but new ghastly discoveries of child neglect emerged every day.

Jonathan Barron stopped by my house one evening, nervous and pale. "All this is connected. People are feeling a curse has descended on Lynchville. I'm totally inundated."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm not sleeping well."

I told him what little I learned from our church members. "Do you still want me involved? My hands are full with my own work."

"I'm, I'm not a religious person, and I'm out of my depth here."

"What's the cause of these breakdowns?"

"Official rumors say military-grade psychotropic drugs leaked into the Lynchville water supply. More likely it's someone out there tormenting vulnerable people. Maybe he's trying to extort them."

"A psychopath?" I asked.

"Perhaps. And if so, I can deal with him. I need you to help with the victims, if we meet any."

"We'll see," I said, trying to put him off. The truth was I didn't want to become involved.

But the horrible events escalated, with new tragedies every day. A grey-headed professor stripped off her clothing and cavorted across her campus until university police tackled her. A homeless man discovered a dead newborn baby in a Wal-Mart dumpster. A retired fireman shot his prize show dogs. Then a Lynchville woman axed her children while they were sleeping and bashed herself in the head.

Jonathan called me late one night, agitated, and said he needed to show me some things. "I'll pick you up at your house," he said. "Early morning."

"Jonathan, I can not get away. I have meetings, hospital visits, and—"

"Put them off."

"I can't."

"Damn it, yes you can!" he said with passion. "Our city is sliding into hell and you and I are the only ones who can figure out why. And then maybe we can do something."

"Okay. Okay. But make it after lunchtime."

Our first stop was the main branch of the public library. Jonathan led me to the reference section and a single metal cabinet next to a desk and an odd contraption.

He pulled an overstuffed file from his briefcase.

"On a morning of October 1945," he whispered, "a woman entered a private residence in Lynchville. Four hours later, the woman was found dead in the front yard. She died from massive bleeding after a botched illegal abortion."

"Tragic."

"Yeah. It is. And gruesome. The Lynchburg *Citizen* said her uterus had been ripped from top to bottom. The coroner reported, 'portions of the fetus partially extruded from the tear.'"

"Ugh," I grunted.

Jonathan opened a drawer in the cabinet and withdrew a canister. He removed a roll of wide film and loaded it into the contraption. "This microfiche reader whines like a banshee," he said.

Nearby library patrons glared as he noisily scrolled down endless newspaper pages, then he said, "This is it. One of the final articles in the series."

The banner headline said, "RESPECTED PHYSICIAN GUILTY."

Jonathan continued in a low voice. "The victim was a 23-year-old woman whose husband was a soldier in the Pacific. He hadn't come home yet after the war. It's not hard to guess that the father of the baby was not her husband, and she sought relief from a Dr. G.D. Gardner, whose license had been revoked after narcotics convictions. Dr. Gardner was subsequently arrested, and convicted of manslaughter. He spent the rest of his life in prison."

"The back alley abortionist, a doctor?"

"A good one gone bad."

"Imagine what the girl's husband felt when he learned his wife died this way," I said. "It's terrible."

"Gardner's residence, where the girl's body was found, was on Haywood Road in west Lynchville."

"Our church is on Haywood."

Jonathan scrolled down half a page. "Look."

I leaned forward. "Two stories, brick. That, that's the house we tore down." I was stunned. "We should put up a memorial for the poor woman and her baby. Oh my. We paved over where she died."

"You'd be shocked with how much holy ground is paved over." Jonathan tapped his file folder. "But we don't understand all this yet."

Our next stop was along Henson Road in the Ponderosa Village, the site of a destroyed office building. We parked at the adjacent motel. Nearly the entire block was heaped with rubble. Heavy equipment was

loading and hauling away the rock, brick, and mangled lumber. Clattering of bulldozer tracks, engine roar, smoke, and dust filled the air.

"It's amazing no one was hurt," I said.

"Here, in the shrubbery."

A landscaped corner of the lot had not been affected by the quake, nor yet by the cleanup work. Stuck in the ground was a small wooden cross draped with a purple, hand-knotted rosary.

"The abortion center, WomanCare, was on this lot once," Jonathan said. "It moved when the state tore down the building to widen the road."

"How did you find this out?"

"One idea leads to another. I allow myself to think what most people unconsciously block from their minds. The present WomanCare was shaken down also."

"Oh, my dear God." I was rattled. "These things don't happen."

"Yeah, they do. Walls of Jericho?"

"What else? Any other destruction linked to abortion?"

"I have one more lead."

"You should have told me these things on the phone."

"It wouldn't have been compelling," Jonathan said. "I don't like being accused of faking evidence. The lady we're meeting is the former director of WomanCare. Her name is Linnea. She's willing to talk with you. We're expected."

"Then, let's go. I need to sit down."

We drove away from the city into a middle-class suburban neighborhood. As we pulled up to a ranch-style house, an obese man with no shirt, wearing his long blonde curling hair loose down his back, was mowing the yard.

"Come on in," he said.

As obese as her husband, Linnea had pretty facial features. We introduced ourselves and she frowned at Jonathan, but when she looked at me, she seemed reassured.

"I quit WomanCare in 2008 when it moved across town," she said. "I'd been thinking about quitting for a long time. When my own daughter was born, it hit me how we were aborting children who were only younger than she was. So, I took a nursing job at a regular medical clinic."

"Tell me about the abortion business," Jonathan said.

"What we did was legal. It was wrong, but it was legal." She hesitated for a moment. "We did abortions almost up to birth."

I couldn't hide my horror.

"I know," she said. "You're right. I didn't actually kill them, the babies, but I was an accomplice." Her voice failed and she cried into a

handkerchief for a while. Then she held out her arms and said, "Look at me. I wear my sins in fat. My husband, too. He was the security guard."

The husband silently nodded.

"Does WomanCare still do late-term abortions?" Jonathan asked.

"God, no. Not now. They quit when they moved. Only up to 20 weeks."

"Only?" Jonathan asked.

"Yeah, that's bad, too, isn't it?"

"If I may ask," I said, "what did you do with the bodies, the corpses?"

"We sold what we didn't send to pathology. They're used… for different purposes, research and education."

Jonathan was thinking, his face in concentrated disarray. "You sold them?"

"We shipped some fresh, refrigerated. Individually or in bulk. We kept the others in storage. Someone else handled that part."

"Oh… What storage?"

"The Xtra Space facility on San Ramon Road. We rented a couple units."

"That's it!" Jonathan exclaimed. "Another property wrecked by the earthquake. I looked at it, but it's locked up tight."

"I think it went bankrupt," she said. "I shudder every time I drive by."

Jonathan seemed to be done, so I said, "May I ask before we leave, have you had any nightmares or unusual experiences lately? Anything odd or creepy?"

"I've heard that others have had them. But not me. I used to be severely depressed and went into therapy, but it's been a few years. Why?"

"Just wondering."

"I like my own church." She looked at Jonathan and asked, "Will you talk about us on your radio show? You promised you wouldn't."

Jonathan squirmed. Before he could answer, I said, "He won't unless you give permission."

"I don't. You know, my husband and I recently lost 114 pounds between us," she said and smiled.

❍

Back in the car, Jonathan's phone rang. He had been ignoring incoming calls throughout the day, but he took this one. Jonathan put the speaker on.

"This is Sergeant Hernandez of the LPD," the girlish female voice said. "We've got DNA results, from the blood samples. You asked me to call you."

"Sergeant Hernandez," Jonathan said. "How are you? What did you find?"

The signal seemed to have cut off.

"Are you there? Sergeant Hernandez? Isabel?"

"I'm here." She cleared her throat. "The state is investigating the lab. We think the samples, or the results, have been tampered with."

"Why? Was it human blood?"

"The questionable results are, that in many cases, the blood is from an offspring of the homeowners—the complainants."

"Child abuse."

"We've gone to another lab to follow up, but, Mr. Barron, some of these people don't have children. They never did."

"Are they lying, Sergeant?"

"They're scared out of their minds."

"Have they received demands for money?"

"Hmm, we'll look into that," she said in a softer, almost cheerful tone. "Thanks for the idea."

After Jonathan disconnected, I said, "She sounds young."

"Smart and cute, too," he said and grinned. "I'm trying to talk her into going on a date with me."

❍

We drove down San Ramon Road. Clouds had rolled in from the west, from the not-too-distant ocean, and daylight already was receding. Vehicles turned on their headlights.

Weeds and weed trees grew rampant on the Xtra Space property wherever they found foothold. The buildings had been jumbled up, but the wire mesh fence on the perimeter stood intact. Someone had posted shiny red No Trespassing signs, and the security cameras looked potentially operational. We walked around the site, and downwind we smelled a rank foulness.

"I'm going in for a look," Jonathan said and began climbing the fence.

"The concertina wire looks mean."

"It's loose here. Find something to push this lower strand up."

I glanced around for a wooden pole or broken tree branch, but there wasn't anything. Jonathan had by now pulled himself horizontal to the ground and was trying to roll himself over the top, under the razor wire, but the wire caught him in the back. He froze there, grunting in pain. "You got something yet? A pole?"

"Should I go to a hardware store?"

"Yeah, and buy some wire cutters while I wait, stuck up here." With resignation he said, "Okay. Failed," and eased off the razor wire. He began to work his legs downward so he could drop, but let loose

prematurely and slammed the ground body-first.

"Ummph," he said and started laughing. "Ohh… My arms just quit."

"You all right?"

"Let's see. Nothing hurt but ego." He struggled to his feet. "Belly abrasions. My back is dripping. Blood, isn't it?"

He held still while I inspected the wound through the slice in his shirt. "Does it hurt?"

"Not at all. Not now."

"Hard to see, but your cut is probably half an inch long. Shouldn't we go to the emergency room?"

"No, no. It's just a puncture. I've got good seat covers. Let's find out who owns this place."

As we walked to the car, Jonathan studied his phone. In a minute he said, "Got you, Lanny Gillman," and entered the address into his GPS.

At Gillman's wood frame house, a thick tree had uprooted and was lying across the yard, branches blocking the main sidewalk. A decrepit blue van was parked in the gravel driveway that ended at a free-standing garage. When I knocked at the house's front door, a monstrous beast on the inside barked and tore at the wood with its claws. The door vibrated with his bass voice.

"He'd kill us, if he could," Jon said.

He rapped several times and the dog's roar grew more frantic. A cold chill gripped me, and I shivered. As we walked down the steps, the monster dog, black and white, gaunt and muscular, appeared in an open upstairs window and watched us. Not barking, but sniffing the air. Saliva dripped from his mouth.

"I hope he doesn't jump," I said.

We approached the garage. The dog now watched from an upstairs window at the side of the house. The garage windows were papered over, but the door at the back was ajar. Jon paused and pulled up an audio recorder that had been hanging around his neck on a lanyard.

"For my show," he said.

He pushed the door open, and I stepped in behind him. Symphonic music played on a radio (Elgar, I believe), and a man in his sixties wearing a baseball cap was stretching packing tape onto a cardboard tube, the tape making a ratcheting sound as it pulled off the dispenser. His back to us, he was sitting at a work table. I cleared my throat like in the movies. (What a stupid idea.)

He jerked around, screamed like a maniac, and fell off his stool.

"Shit," he said as he labored, panting, to his feet. "You scared me. Didn't you see the No Trespassing signs?"

He proceeded to cover and flip sheets of what looked like plastic poster board.

"Mr. Gillman, I'm Jonathan T. Barron of the syndicated show, Strange Days Radio, and this is my investigative partner, Pastor Paul Taylor of Second Presbyterian Church." He handed Gillman a business card.

"Yeah? I know your show. Nice to meet you, pastor." His glance shifted around the garage as if checking for anything else to conceal.

"We're investigating the earthquake," Jon said.

As Jon told him of our findings, Gillman grew pale. I then noticed the large cardboard box of shipping tubes. There were lots of boxes.

"According to a former director of WomanCare," Jon said, "units of your self-storage building once housed the bodies of aborted fetuses. Late-term babies."

"Before I bought the place. I don't know anything."

"Is that so?" Jon said and flipped over one of the upside-down posters.

"Hands off!" Gillman lunged forward and crushed the poster into a ball. "You guys leave, or I'll put Panda on you. My dog. You don't want that. He's hungry, and expensive to feed."

I started away and Jon took my arm. Neither of us spoke or moved. Jon was calling his bluff.

"What's around your neck?" Gilman said. "Are you recording me?"

"No."

Gillman strode around to Jon and jerked the recorder hard, breaking the spring clip of the lanyard. He smashed the device onto the floor. It bounced, broke into pieces, and he crushed the largest piece with his heel.

"You destroyed my property."

"You're trespassing. I'm going for Panda."

"I'm calling the police."

"Oh, that's better. Saves me a mess."

Jon called 911, reported an assault and gave the address. Then he looked at Gilman and said, "We'll wait."

Gillman waited a few seconds and then began picking up and straightening his garage. I stepped outside, ready to wait a tedious half-hour, or more. Above me, patches of brilliant stars seemed to race through contorted clouds. I didn't remember the stars ever being so painfully bright.

Headlights in my face stole away my vision. The police, and so soon. A female officer climbed from the black Dodge Charger.

"Over here," I called and went in to tell Jon.

Through the open door we heard the dog roaring. The officer tapped the door with a knuckle and entered. "What's the problem?"

Strangely, Jon was smiling.

Both talking at once, Gillman explained how we were trespassing, and Jon explained how Gillman broke his recorder.

The officer, capturing the gist, interrupted. "Okay gentlemen, here's the deal. You can go down to the magistrate's office tomorrow morning and fill out warrants for each other's arrest, or you can—"

"Work it out," I said.

"Yeah."

"He's trespassing and was recording me illegally," Gillman said.

"Doesn't matter," the officer said. "It's a criminal offense to break someone's property."

"Is that right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yep, yep." Gillman sighed. "Jonathan T. Barron?"

"That's me."

"Okay. We'll work it out."

"All right," the officer said. "Sir, do you mind if I talk with these two visitors privately for a moment?"

"Suit yourself."

We walked outside away from the garage. "What's going on, Jonathan?" she whispered. "I'm just off my shift. Look, anyone else would haul your butts in for trespassing. What happened to your back?"

Of course, I thought. Sergeant Hernandez.

"This guy's up to his neck in the earthquake deal," Jon said. "No time to tell you more."

She shook her head. "It's crazy. You need to involve the police."

"Soon. I promise."

"You're in my debt."

"I am," Jon said with exaggerated sincerity. "Let me buy you a steak dinner, Isabel. This weekend. After my show."

She smiled, and Jonathan was right. She *was* cute.

"You're a sneaky devil," she said. "How did you get mixed up with this guy?" she said to me. She began walking back to her cruiser, or, I should say, personal car. "I'll answer you tomorrow, Jonathan, when I'm not tired." The beast Panda resumed roaring from the upstairs window and she glared at it coldly. "Someone should shoot that animal."

When we re-entered the garage, Gillman had his back turned again and jumped out of his skin, again.

"Oh, it's you," he said after he recovered. "Yep, yep. Work it out. The Xtra Space once kept late term fetuses? Still does. Early ones, too. At least last time I checked before the earthquake. I'm afraid to go

inside there now."

"All those bodies in a damaged building?" I said. "Do you realize what a health hazard this is?"

"Yeah, with the electricity off and the freezers thawing. Containers all broken to hell. No insurance. Oh yeah. I couldn't face it. Couldn't face the attention."

"We need to call the Health Department," I said.

"Closed," Gillman said. "It's after hours."

"Then call 911, again."

Mr. Gillman scooted onto his stool, propped his elbows on the table, and rested his chin between his hands. "I'll probably be arrested," he said weakly. "Unless I can clean the mess up first."

"Wait," Jon said as I pulled out my phone. "Let's look before they seal the building. Before any clues are beyond our reach. Will you let us in? Now?"

"If Pastor Taylor prays first," he said mockingly.

"Good idea," Jon said. "By the way, what have you got going here?"

"You want to know? I suppose a picture isn't as bad as reality." He turned over a sheet of poster board.

I'd never seen anything so nasty before. It was a 2-foot-by-3 foot image of an aborted baby. I felt like throwing up.

"I sell them," he said. "I take photos and make posters. My pictures are famous."

"How perverse," Jon said.

"Me, perverse? Anti-abortion fanatics parade them in front of the clinics. Children see them. That's what's perverse."

"Aren't you anti-abortion?"

"Not particularly. I'm pro-choice. But you can't help feeling something."

"Do you make much money?"

"Not anymore. I tried selling bodies at first, after I bought the place cheap and found them inside."

"Disgusting," I said. "It's strange that law enforcement never investigated you."

"Let's all leave now, *please*." Jon said.

"How could a photograph of a legal procedure be illegal?" Gillman said. "This isn't pornography. People don't feel like killing someone when they see a corpse… I never did. On the other hand…"

"Just, just shut up," Jon said.

"Yep, yep… Give me a second."

Gillman rummaged in a corner and lifted a heavy box. "Fresh back-up batteries for the security cams. The old ones are expired, I'm

sure. It's late for changing them, isn't it? Hey, will I be on your radio program?"

"Maybe."

"I'll need to be paid."

Jon shrugged a shoulder. "How did I know it already? That's bizarre."

"Hey, don't disrespect me. I've got nice pictures, too. A whole photo album of babies saved because of my posters. Customers send them."

❍

Gillman drove in his van by himself. When we arrived, he unlocked the gate and let us inside. Nearby streetlights painted the scene with an ominous orange-grey glow.

Knowing what we smelled made the stench worse.

Gillman unlocked the nearest unit, and as he pulled the door open, it scraped the concrete floor. We peered in without entering. Faint light eked in through the partly collapsed ceiling. The smell of formaldehyde nearly knocked me over. What Jonathan's flashlight revealed looked like the shower room floor of a Nazi death camp, except the naked dead people here were tiny, not fully formed, and mixed with shattered glass. I stepped backwards and retched. Jon was taking flash pictures. Gillman walked away saying he'd reactivate the security cameras.

Standing near the next unit, Jon suddenly bellowed, "Gillman, come here please! Gillman!"

"Give me a damn minute," he yelled from the door at the office end of the facility.

I went to see what had gotten Jon's attention. He was staring at smears of partly dried blood on the pavement near a tear in the wall. The smears formed trails going in different directions.

"Crap," Gillman said when he ran up. "An animal's been in here. A raccoon or coyote. This is a reefer unit."

"No footprints," Jon said. "Open it up."

"Not without a gas mask."

"Give me the key," Jon said.

I made sure I was upwind. Jon inserted the key, but the lock was jammed. Gillman trotted toward the office and returned holding a tiny tube with a nozzle from which he squirted into the keyhole. "Graphite powder," he said and backed up to where I was. The key turned and Jon opened the door. The odor of freezer burn and rotted flesh, even worse than before, seeped toward us. I covered my mouth and nose and backed away further. Jon said nothing as he disappeared inside, and when he walked over to us a minute later, his face looked pale and wet, like a clammy cadaver.

"I've been in battle in Afghanistan," he said, "and I've never seen what's in there. It's indescribable. There was a severed foot… I don't think an animal has been inside, not a hungry one. Nothing's been eaten. Okay, Gillman, should I call the police again or will you?"

"I will," Gillman grumbled.

Jon took photographs of everything. When the police arrived, they sent us to the sidewalk, and what flew from their mouths when they looked inside cannot be repeated on radio, as Jon said. A Hazmat team arrived soon afterwards. I finally called my wife and told her what we'd been doing, and I apologized for not calling before.

Print and broadcast media showed up and Gillman edged into his van and slunk away. Police told the reporters nothing.

But Jonathan is a pro and gave a number of interviews, saying: "My weekly syndicated show, Strange Days Radio, is named after a song by the classic rock band, the Doors. The real story of these dead babies is suggested in its lyrics. 'Strange days have found us. Strange days have tracked us down.' You won't believe what I've uncovered, and I'll reveal it all on my show tomorrow evening."

Jon took me home. We didn't have a lot to say during the drive. As we neared my house, he accepted a phone call and it was Gillman who said, "What happened after I left?"

"Not much, I expect the police will see you again in the morning." Jon hung up and said to me, "I didn't mention this before, but when I was with the thawed-out bodies, I felt they were watching me with malice. I've felt this before on investigations, but never so intense, so bitter. I can handle blood and decay, but that? It got to me."

"We both need sleep, and food."

"You're probably right."

We pulled up to my house. Jon stared out the windshield and I opened the door.

"Wait a second!" he said. "Is it possible Gillman has been sneaking around Lynchville and tormenting the mothers? He knew who they were. The bodies were labeled, some of them. He might have another demented money-making enterprise in play."

I scoffed at my own cynicism. "That would explain the blood and the noises."

"It's a theory," Jon said. "Conscience-tortured people receiving letters from zombie babies demanding inheritance money or else the curse will never end. He doesn't look capable of that kind of depravity, but they never do. He could be an agent for someone else."

"His damned demon dog?"

Jon half laughed. "You astonish me, pastor."

"If Gillman's in any way responsible for this, we've stopped him.

We've found our solution."

"Let's talk more tomorrow."

That night my wife disconnected our phones so I wouldn't be disturbed. I sealed my clothes in a trash bag and showered. As I told my wife about the day, sparing her the worst, I managed to eat a little vegetable soup. She said our children invited us to a week with them in Hawaii in February for our anniversary. I sighed with pleasure, looking forward to resurrecting my surfing skills and riding the surging blue waves again, as I had in my youth. I closed my eyes and imagined feeling the breeze on my skin. It felt good being home, warm and clean with my wife giving me a shoulder massage. That and a glass of sherry put me down for the night. The next thing I knew, my wife was shaking me in bed, and someone was banging on the front door and shouting.

I threw on a jacket.

It was Jonathan.

"You've got to come now," he said hoarsely. "Gillman called, he left a message screaming, 'They're murdering me! They're murdering me!'"

"Did you call 911?"

"Busy signal."

My wife brought pants, shoes and socks, and a shirt in an armload. I ran out barefoot and jumped into Jon's car. A murky reluctant day was breaking. A man crawled on hands and knees in the yard across the street. Jon jammed his car into gear and accelerated, the car issuing a guttural snarl.

"Shouldn't we help?" I said.

"I stopped for a guy just like him. It's like he was on LSD. We got to check on Gillman."

"What do you think happened?"

"His targets caught him. His victims. I don't know."

We didn't get far when my wife called me.

"Honey," she said, "I didn't sleep last night. I stayed in the guest bedroom and read. I kept hearing shrieking and banging around the neighborhood, and alarms. Ambulance and police sirens. The power flicked off and on and dogs were barking non-stop. I wanted to wake you, but you needed your sleep."

"You should have woken me. Did anyone call?"

"I disconnected the phones, remember? Check your voicemail."

"Ah. Thanks, dear. When I get time."

As we drove through neighborhoods, onto a highway, and along commercial strips, we saw people lying beside the road. And people running crazily. Wrecked cars. Fires blazing like a citywide riot was in

progress. Broken windows everywhere. The lights at intersections weren't working. We drew near to Gillman's house. I called 911, again. Still busy.

Suddenly, Jon skidded to a stop. "This is like ancient Egypt, during the Passover."

"You said you weren't a believer."

"I believe in the existence of evil. It's ultimate good that I doubt."

Jon then made a U-turn and said, "I think Gillman called from his Xtra Space."

We parked half up the sidewalk at the self-storage facility. The gate was unlocked. Lanny Gillman was lying on the ground and gripping a bolt cutter in one hand. The door to every one of the storage units stood wide open.

Jon checked his vitals. "He's dead, poor wretch."

"Oh my. Why was he here?"

"Probably collecting food for Panda."

"Nooo," I groaned.

Jon took his camera and began filming. "You're viewing the remains of the owner of this facility," he narrated. "I don't see any lethal injuries, but his skin and clothing are dusty and scuffed, as if he thrashed in agony, and this… is one of the rooms where the bodies are kept. The earthquake— Oh my gosh. They're gone. They're all gone."

He paused, lowered and turned off the camera, and said," I can't do this. I'd be as bad as Gillman."

We looked everywhere, and nothing remained of all the dead babies we had seen, not even a smell. And possibly *all* the units had contained bodies, not only the two we saw earlier. The place was vacant and pristine clean. Blood smears no longer stained the pavement.

"The security camera," Jon said, and trotted to the office. The door wouldn't open, but he beat a window in with a chunk of concrete debris. He gingerly climbed inside and emerged from the door with a blanket under his arm. "I've got the video! Let's go."

"Where to?"

"My studio." He extended his hand, palm up. "Cool. It's starting to rain. What a relief."

"911 is ringing, finally," I said. "Police, please… We found a body… Xtra Space on Ramon… An adult… Okay." I looked at Jon. "They'll pick him up later."

"Panda is dead in the office." He covered Gillman with the blanket.

"Shouldn't we stay until the police arrive?"

"No."

As Jon drove me home, the rain poured down hard. The fires we had seen earlier extinguished. By then no one was wandering witless in

the streets anymore.

It turned into a marvelous day, considering the terror the city had endured during the night. A big storm had blown in from the Pacific, and rain descended all day, not so much as to cause landslides, but enough to calm everyone. The high contrast and brilliance of light I first noticed when the earthquake struck had been subdued by mist and clouds.

We activated our church networks and invited everyone to come talk and pray. We organized teams to check on neighbors. Despite the difficulty of travel, our building was packed by noon. People brought food and stayed all day, and the young people brought sleeping bags and pads so they could camp on the floor overnight.

Late that evening, Jonathan and I did his radio program, live.

Jonathan said as an introduction, "Believe me, of all the psychic, supernatural stories I've investigated in my career, this is the most incredible, the most horrifying, and the most personal for you, the listener. And I've got documentation, the evidence, here in my hands. I could post video on my website, though you'd say I faked it. I have pictures. But, I can't show you what I've seen. If you Lynchville listeners haven't been visited by horrible phenomena since our earthquake, then you're fine. You're more than fine.

"If you have been visited, then you know what I'm talking about. Most of you out there are not in my town of Lynchville, but you've read or heard accounts or seen something on television. If you ever have trusted me, then don't trust the news people or the government. They ignore facts, explain everything else away, and mislead you—they can't help themselves, it's self-deception. Self-protection. We're going to take calls for the remainder of the show, but first I want to introduce my co-host, Dr. Paul Taylor, senior pastor of Second Presbyterian Church of Lynchville. Dr. Taylor has been at my side during this whole ordeal."

"Thank you, Jonathan," I said. "I have only a few remarks, and then I'd be happy to take questions. You may expect me to emphasize sin, repentance, natural retribution (that is, you reap what you sow) and forgiveness, and I'm sorry if I disappoint you here. Those subjects are essential, but there are other times to hear the Gospel of Redemption. You can visit our church website to hear some of my past sermons.

"It's no secret that Jonathan and I discovered a storage facility containing the remains of aborted children. Thousands of them. Their parents came to Lynchville from around the U.S. It's also no secret that Jonathan and I are suspected of removing those remains and burying them in violation of state laws. In a few days, we'll be holding a memo-

rial service for those dead children at our church. We'll also join in healing prayer for their parents, whoever they may be. We'll broadcast the service on streaming video. Everyone is welcome to attend or watch.

"Like many Christians, I believe that children who die before they're born, who die either naturally or unnaturally, and newborns and infants, those innocent children are in Heaven with a loving Creator. Jesus said, 'Let the children come to me, let no one hinder them.' That's all I have for now."

"Thanks, Dr. Taylor," Jonathan said. "We'll take your calls when we return from these messages…"

The radio broadcast was six months ago. Jon's show and its re-broadcasts and podcasts broke all records, and for a season, his was the most listened-to program of its type. Since then Jon proved to be right in saying that the media and the government misled everyone, and he was wrong that anyone was "fine." No one is fine.

Jon felt inadequate to the reality he had uncovered and wanted a new direction, and as I suggested to him, he's considering applying to seminary to study Church History.

I don't want to tell you, reader, what we witnessed on those videos from the Xtra Space Storage Facility, because you won't believe me, and the more I press the point, the more you'd call me a fraud. Or, you'd laugh it off like you would a campy horror movie, one with the title, "Vengeance of the Bloody Fetuses." It's okay if you think I'm lying, or that I'm deluded, because what we saw *does not* align with anything we know is possible. But I will tell you what we saw, anyway. I'll tell you for the same reason we now share this entire story in print. Because, despite the staggering events of Lynchville, and, it appears now, in more distant places, after these few months the country has gone back to normal. That is what's scary.

Here is what we saw: The images are not clear and the lighting was bad. The recording shifted from camera to camera… Lonnie Gillman arrived. He opened the doors, slapped at his legs, and fell. Then we noticed what looked like human fetuses of different sizes—lumps of flesh, really—dragging themselves and squirming along the ground, along the pavement. Some of the earlier ones were… they were flowing along in liquid—we guessed because of a glistening movement. We watched tortured hours of them crawling, creeping, rippling away until they all were gone.

END

Guest Lecture

The speaker paused to survey his audience one final time. A professor or two leaned against the wall, and scattered throughout the cavernous lecture hall were probably three dozen bored students—no doubt both undergraduate and graduate.

Dr. Gimbel's audiences were growing smaller, and they didn't laugh at the jokes anymore. People had lost interest in his subject of zombie theology. Thankfully, it was his last appearance on this particular university tour.

His pause would, he hoped, add significance to his next words. And it was working. Everyone was staring at him now, even the students who had been smiling at their laptop computers and phones.

"In conclusion," the speaker said at last, "the concept of zombies affirms for us that humans don't just have a dark side, but rather a depraved fundamental nature. When an infected person's spirit departs from his or her body, and the zombie pathogen reignites the animal life within, what does the zombie do? It doesn't contemplate the metaphysical wonders of existence, or of resurrection; rather it assaults living people and devours them, if it possibly can.

"With rare historical exceptions, the worst of our depraved nature is kept in check while we are alive, though it finds expression in the ordinary deviations, such as, for example, the flourish of zombie phenomena in literature, film, and games. Why this macabre fascination? It's because the horror and gore appealed to our prurient natures. And a zombie is not only hungry, it's angry and hateful, which tells us that we all possess a vicious force embedded, buried deep within our beings.

"My theory then is, within the zombie universe, or ontological lexicon, or milieu, it's not the triggering pathogen that's evil, but humans. We are the zombies. So, if we can never defeat the plague, what, if anything, can be done to alter human nature? And if we *are* able to change human nature, should we? What might the cost be to our humanity? These are inquiries we all must consider."

Gimbel collected up his notes to signify that the lecture had ended.

No one applauded, at all.

No one had any questions.

The Chairman of the Department of Religion jumped up from his onstage seat and dashed to the podium. "Umm. Dr. Gimbel will be autographing his book *A Speculative Theology of Zombies* in the foyer. This book, as I mentioned, once topped the *New York Times* bestseller list for nine weeks. The Department is providing free copies. Umm, let's thank Dr. Gimbel for his sacrifice in visiting our campus."

The Department Chairman clapped his hands together several times, and a few audience members politely imitated him. The rest began gathering up their coats, backpacks, and other gear.

"Just a reminder for my students," the Chairman said into the microphone. "I'm giving extra credit for a no-more-than-thousand-word essay based on Dr. Gimbel's treatise. It must be turned in by next Wednesday, midnight."

At that moment a low breathy growl echoed through the hall. From behind a screen at the side of the stage emerged a slouching figure dragging its mangled stump of a foot. Pale, vacant eyes, a filthy football jersey wrapping its body, followed by an overpowering, putrid smell. It growled again between its black, broken teeth and lunged at Dr. Gimbel, who seemed to have frozen in place.

The Chairman grabbed Gimbel by the jacket and jerked him clear as two students with baseball bats hopped onto the stage. The zombie lunged again. One of the students smacked the zombie in the head, and when it dropped, they completed the job with a downward swing each.

"How in the blazes did it get into the building?" the Chairman said with irritation. "Second lapse this week. I'm filing a complaint with Campus Police. Anyway, whew, thanks guys. Let's call Housekeeping in here to clean up, okay?"

He turned to the guest speaker, and nodding toward the two students, said, "My excellent Teacher Assistants. Dr. Gimbel, I most sincerely, most sincerely apologize."

Dr. Gimbel, who had nearly caught his breath, said, "No problem. My cane?"

The Chairman passed him his cane and Gimbel limped down the steps and through the lecture hall into the foyer. There, the students were reclaiming their field hockey sticks, tennis rackets, shovels, bats, and other assorted weapons. Outside, a handful of zombies pounded on the thick, barred windows with their fists. A small group of students inside the glass exit doors was discussing meeting later for coffee.

"And did you recognize the zombie on the stage?" one female student said.

"Jesse Cavanaugh," a male student said. "Number 29. Heisman Trophy contender."

"Yeah. A great person," she said with sadness. "All right, gang, let's run for it. I've got a physics exam next period."

"You all be careful out there!" Dr. Gimbel said.

"Thanks." She clapped him on the shoulder.

"Ready, set, go!" she said and shoved against a door and held it open as her friends swarmed out. Gimbel watched them form up, speed

across the quad, and dispatch a zombie or two that approached too close.

The Chairman by then was standing beside Dr. Gimbel and said, “Sorry, that no one stayed for your book signing.”

“It’s okay,” Gimbel said cheerily. “They’re busy.”

END

Not the Wrong Planet

The *Radiant* entered a high, slow orbit around Lumen.

Alone in his tiny quarters, Specialist Johnten stared from the port window at the charcoal-black nightside of the planet. No lights broke the gloom below.

Bleak and empty, he wrote in his field notebook. *Our initial proximity view of an Earth-similar sphere circling the first dark star ever discovered.*

Dark star. A black hole in particular effects, but lower in mass and bound to a region of dark matter. Though Johnten worked hard at astrophysics, his professional expertise was in anthropology, and Earth Command had recruited him for the remote chance the *Radiant* encountered advanced sentient beings.

Surely no opportunity on Lumen to catalog and interpret alien cultural traits, he wrote. *Another lonely, silent world. Like me.*

Johnten watched at the window until he nodded off. When he awoke, the dayside of the planet—dawn, he supposed—was flowing under him.

A weird cluster of rocks a kilometer or so away sped from the planet. He had little time to wonder about that, because, just then, the chief Communication Officer blasted across the ship-wide intercom. "There's life on Lumen," Mr. Esang screeched. "We're seeing cities. Aircraft. Unbelievable!"

~

Johnten squeezed into the packed auditorium, taking the only remaining front row seat. Toward the end of landing orientation, Captain Therreal remarked, "It's odd that Lumen's dominant creatures haven't communicated." He glanced down at Johnten. "We shall require your insights after all, Specialist."

"It's a dream fulfilled, sir," he mumbled, hoping he didn't sound stupid.

Mr. Esang was twitching beside Johnten and waved his hand like a schoolboy. Without waiting for permission, Esang jumped up. "Excuse me, sir, nothing *from* Lumen, but the planet is *bombarded* by untranslatable messages. Except there's one from a female saying in inverted, I mean, reversed English, 'Please come back. We need you.'"

The Captain's face knotted in mystified concern, but all he said was, "Thank you, Mr. Esang. Everyone be sure your preclusive inoculations are up-to-date. You're dismissed."

~

The transport shuttle's descent revealed clouds, then low hills

covered in a carpet of deciduous-like flora. The scene from Johnten's window seat appeared as a film negative with antipodal colours. What might be shadow emanated light, and it all incandesced with a lustrous glow. The Captain had selected a field outside a northern coastal village for the landing, and as they neared the ground, Johnten observed a massive throng of inhabitants gathered around the proposed site.

"Do they know we're coming?" he asked himself.

The other dozen or so Radiants discussed the riddle with their companions.

When the transport settled, it took a minute for Assistant Safety Officer Sanderson to confirm the atmosphere's analysis. "Real good," she said at last. "Gas proportions nearly identical to Earth's, as we predicted."

The landing party members moved to the transport's integument door, Johnten clutching his field notebook to his chest.

"Eager today, professor?" Sanderson asked him.

He slowly lowered his notebook to his side. "I've told you, Miss Sanderson, I'm not a professor."

"I know, I know. I'm just messing with you."

"Oh, okay. You're teasing. Did you know the term 'mess' once referred to the dining hall of a sailing ship?" This seemed to create a natural segue, so he said, "Let's have lunch sometime."

Sanderson only grimaced and shook her head.

When the integument door opened, flooding the compartment with the planet's air, everyone stood stock-still and breathed carefully to give one final test to the atmosphere's compatibility with human physiology. Johnten felt a slight dizziness, but Sanderson hyperventilated and passed out cold; an alarm buzzed, the external door slammed shut, the room flushed with Terran air, and medics evacuated Sanderson to a berth where she soon revived.

After a few additional tests for airborne metaviruses, the door was opened again, and the team shuffled down the ramp.

For Johnten the view was like a blazing impressionistic painting of a New England landscape. Figures approached from the crowd. They appeared blurry until they drew near, and he realized with a shock that they were walking in reverse. A person turned to him, and now he saw it was a young woman. She held a baby on her hip, a little girl almost a year old grasping her mother's blouse. The young mother's luminescent skin and garments, and facial features possessing delicate contours no race of Earth ever had, gave her a beauty he never imagined possible.

Her baby. She reminded him of photographs of his own mother when she was a child.

The woman stepped toward Johnten and kissed him lingeringly on the mouth—her lips cool to the touch—and when she stepped back she held a garland of flowers in her free hand. A memory burst into existence, a memory telling him the sweet smelling lei had hung around his neck only seconds before. How was this happening? She spoke to him in a familiar, bizarre, inverted language.

And as other crewmembers were greeted with similar, albeit less intimate farewells from the indigenous people, Johnten felt himself swept up in astonished awareness that time itself—or perhaps even the physical laws of this newly discovered world in this darkish planetary system—flowed backwards; yet for the visitors from Earth and their artifacts, time moved as usual.

They existed within the same reality and were passing in converse directions—his future being the young woman's past, and his past being her future.

So the mysterious radio message had been for him.

Johnten's first impulse was to sprint back to the transport and hide in a locker, but for once in his awkward life, when everything was infinitely awkward, he knew what to do. He held his ground and began writing on his field notebook. The young woman lifted the garland to her nose and breathed in. She smiled like gentle sunlight, wiped her eyes, sniffed twice, and nodded with comprehension as droplets leaped from the ground, rolled up her cheeks, and squeezed into her tear ducts.

He finished writing and held up the notebook so she could read his words, *I love you and our baby very, very much. I promise, we will be together again.*

Johnten swapped his notebook for the child who snuggled her face against his chest. Such a brief period ahead to be a father and a husband. And he had no idea how it all would work, but clearly he had already solved certain future problems of cross-cultural interaction—he had a family!

Specialist Johnten slipped his available arm around his wife's waist, and though he nearly stumbled, they walked backwards toward the crowd.

END

I'm Not a Baby Anymore

Dad adopted me when I was a pup, and we don't look alike at all, but no matter. He was single and kind of old for raising a baby, and not the most responsible parent, either—I mean, he was okay until he… but I'll explain that situation in a minute.

Our friend Jake and his girl Sally would sit around the campfire with us and tell stories. (I love being outdoors with all the delicious smells!) Sometimes they'd be drunk and argue. I was too young to remember it happening, but my favorite story was about my adoption. Jake loved to tell it because he was the lookout and saw it all.

Jake would say, "Old Dad, he'd been scoping *the agency* for weeks and found his baby. Oh, he talked about the baby so much—he loved you, Henry—and we wore out hearing it, so I says, 'Why don't you *adopt* him?' Your Dad declares he'd like that more than the whole world. So, we make a plan. Starting off, we clean up: fresh clothes from Goodwill, a shower at the shelter, cologne.

"At *the agency* Sally goes to the back and asks, could she hold the python. Another clerk lifts you from your pen, Henry, so Dad can, 'see how you act,' and meanwhile, I study the security man. With the snake on her shoulders, Sally freezes and starts screaming like a crazy-woman. Everyone's now distracted. Dad snatches you up, stuffs you under his jacket, and walks out the door. When Security Man gives chase, I step in his way and down he spills. He being heavy, me being light—I'm escaped. Gone."

That was Jake talking, remember. If he ever messed up and said, "Purebred English Bulldog—worth a barrel of money," Sally shushed him and Dad looked worried.

Dad always finished the story. "Oh, I ran and ran, Henry. Ran like the wind. We've got our secret place here in the woods where the police can't find us, and we live like kings."

Then he'd massage my neck, pick me up, and cradle me back and forth. We were happy.

~

Sally's belly grew large, and one day she came home with a new pup, a scrawny, hairless runt. Jake beamed with pride, but Dad became upset. He whimpered and twitched in his sleep and cried, "My babies, my babies." I'd snuggle in closer, and he'd put his arm around me and squeeze.

~

Somehow Jake found a little extra money and asked Dad to babysit the runt so he and Sally might go on a date. It was a cool, quiet, fall

evening and Dad built a cozy fire. We ate stew. Dad warmed Sally's milk and fed the pitiful creature. He set it down asleep on a pad.

Then we noticed: flashing lights and gruff voices.

"Police!" Dad barked.

He gaped at the runt and he gaped at me. I thought it was an easy decision—pick me, obviously—but Dad twisted back and forth in agony and pulled his scruffy beard.

The tense voices approached, sour scents and more lights.

"Oh my gosh, I don't know what to do," Dad whined. "I can't save you both." Suddenly he grabbed the runt and ran like the wind. Like a speedy spider on its back legs.

I couldn't believe it. He'd left me behind. I tried to keep up, but it was impossible—I was breathing too hard—so I lay down on the path and waited.

The nice police officers gave me pie, and in the morning one took me to a place called the Pet Store. Those odd people clapped their hands and exclaimed how big I was. After awhile I went to live with Kayla in an apartment. It's too clean, but she feeds me crunchy food and I enjoy our walks. Walking is more fun than being packed around in a blanket or pushed in a shopping cart as Dad always did. Not long ago Kayla and I saw Dad at the park playing catch with a spritely female. She'd race along, leap into the air, and clamp her teeth on a disk.

I'm glad Dad found a friend, one to run with him. Hmm. She's kind of cute, actually.

Yeah. I'm really glad I'm not a baby anymore.

END

Demon Dragonfly

The slave Mao Ping picked himself up and brushed the dirt from his elegant embroidered robe. His cowardly porter peeked from behind a vendor stall, stumbled to him, and bent down to reclaim the russet cloth-wrapped package.

Happily, Mao Ping thought, the mysterious package didn't appear damaged. Its contents might be the open umbrella of a princess, but was heavier, as he had noticed earlier at the wood carver's shop.

Bellowing soldiers strutted up and down the stone-paved roadway and brandished their clubs.

Mao Ping took a last forlorn look at a squat, square building inside a bamboo barricade and pushed through the teeming, fearful crowds, his porter behind him lugging the precious parcel. Half an hour later, outside the gate to the garden courtyard of the Governor's residence, Mao Ping bobbed a disrespectfully shallow bow.

"Why are you so late?" the corpulent Head Butler said and smacked Mao Ping across his shaved head. "How did your robe become so filthy? It's torn. The Third Son will want an explanation."

Mao Ping, however, did not owe his fellow servant an explanation, and the Head Butler stomped off muttering, "Late on Master's birthday. You deserve your pigtail hacked off."

This would be insignificant compared to being eunuched not many years ago when Mao Ping's father, a farming peasant, received the honor of selling his son to the Governor's house. Mao Ping's thoughts flew to his little sister, nearly twelve years old and living at home. She wouldn't be so lucky. He worried his parents might sell her to a brothel during another lean time. But Mao Ping had always dreamed that someday she might marry his master.

"There you are!" roared the young Third Son from the archway leading to his wing of the house. He handed a sword in its sheath to his combat trainer and ran to seize the package from the terrified porter. He suddenly turned sideways and looked Mao Ping up and down. "You're late and you smell like a latrine," but just as suddenly he forgot his ire and said, "Follow me. You won't believe what you'll see."

Mao Ping trotted after the Third Son through the familiar maze of corridors and rooms, passing the observatory and climbing a zigzag stairway onto the tiles of the house's highest roof. The Third Son had moved fast, though it was certain he couldn't see his feet through the package. Here was a cobbled-together platform, and on it stood a machine of a complexity Mao Ping had never seen before, the size of a weaned pig, with tarnished silver and coal-black parts.

The Third Son untied the package, setting aside the inner paper wrapper of maroon and gilt. What emerged appeared to be two carved waterwheels with strangely twisted paddles. The Third Son set the larger wheel flat upon the machine, pushed the much smaller wheel into the machine's side on one end, tinkered with connectors, and then stood back trembling.

"Watch this," he said. "It's a marvel." He took up a pearl-trimmed, lacquered box and pushed one of its protruding levers. The wheels began to spin. The machine's noise grew louder, swishing like swords slashing the air. Mao Ping gaped as the machine rose up and hovered for a minute, then settled back upon its launching place.

"It's better than a kite," the Third Son said. "My Demon Dragonfly. Last year my father gave me a chest full of gold for my birthday, and I had her built. What do you think, Ping?" He stared at the slave and waited for an answer. "Oh, I forgot. I permit you to speak. What do you think of her?"

Barely able to breathe, Mao Ping lowered his gaze. "Is it magic?"

"I hardly know. Nature holds many secrets. I'll ask Brother Chen, the monk who drew the plans. He says it's a prototype. Here, you take a turn."

For an hour and more, slave and master, being the same age and not quite adults, forgot their differences of class and authority as they snacked on slices of melon and practiced maneuvering the Demon Dragonfly until the Head Butler heaved his frame up the stairway to announce, "Pardon me, but it's time to dress for your banquet, my lord."

"Next time we fly her," the Third Son whispered when the Butler had left, "the Demon Dragonfly will drop melons on those compost mounds near the river."

~

Late that evening, Mao Ping woke at a snort—his *own* snort. A ghostly face hovered outside his alcove within the Third Son's inner chambers. Then the face, his master's grinning countenance, floated forward into the alcove's lamplight. Mao Ping jumped up from his mat and stared at the floor midway between himself and his master.

"Overcome, I see. Tut, tut," the Third Son said. "Rising before sunrise, walking miles to the crafters, scuffling in the marketplace—no doubt, flying the Demon Dragonfly until you forgot about time, standing behind my chair during a seven-course feast, not eating and drinking until everything is cleared away…you have no excuse for napping, no excuse whatsoever! You should be beaten."

Mao Ping appreciated his master's harmless jokes.

"However, the fireworks are beginning. They're your punishment.

Let's move to the balcony overlooking the city."

The two of them stood side by side during the dazzling display. Flames and blooming flowers, bright hailstones, thunder, flashes of lighting, arching fire rockets, more booming thunder, geysers, and sparkling fountains of lava. The Third Son seemed immersed in thought, and after the final devastating cataclysm that might have split the Earth in half, he turned away and said quietly, "Lovely… noisy… but unimaginative. Bring me tea."

When Mao Ping brought the pot and a fine porcelain bowl on a tray, the Third Son said, "Where's yours?"

Mao Ping hurried to his alcove and brought a bowl, a twin to the Third Son's.

"I'm waiting for my father's birthday present to me, and when it arrives, I'll dismiss you for the night. But, Father heard about your lateness today, and that I didn't discipline you. He wants me strong. So, first tell me what happened?"

Mao Ping, like his master, was sitting cross-legged on a cushion with his tea bowl in his hand. He set the bowl on the floor and closed his eyes.

"You won't answer? Then, I command you. Tell me now! I order you, or else welcome your instant beheading."

Mao Ping rose to his knees and looked at his master's foot. "Please forgive me, sir," he murmured. "When I left the wood carver's shop and passed by a squat building where physicians cut boys with a knife, the monks were praying and burning incense. I stopped to watch. Some men stood on a cart nearby and began yelling about taxation. They raised a painted banner on a pole…"

"Keep talking," the Third Son said and sipped at his tea.

"A crowd gathered. Before long, soldiers arrived and ordered the people to leave, but the crowd threw stones at them. The soldiers then began beating everyone. I tried to run away, and someone pushed me to the ground. Forgive me, sir. That's why I was late."

"Yes," the Third Son said, considering. "A tax riot. They're all too common. Did you throw a stone? Did you?"

Mao Ping sighed.

"But not at the soldiers."

Mao Ping shuddered.

"You threw one at the squat building! You're pitiful… Praying monks must be peaceful, and we rulers? We should be effectual and pragmatic. Hmm… but you took advantage of the confusion for your private war—is this the place where they eunuched you?"

"Yes, sir. Or, a place like it. I can't really remember."

"Physicians don't take away life, and many boys die from castra-

tion. These surgeons are butchers—so, you're corrected. Don't call them physicians. And don't dare tell anyone what I said. I command you to be silent on this subject.

"Because I'm the Third Son and not the First, I'll never be governor of our province. But my father grooms me to command his army, and you and I are to travel next year to the eastern capital where we'll study under Emperor Zhao's own high general. We have many enemies all around." Here his nostrils flared. "No one except you knows how I *hate* our policy of slavery."

The slave allowed his face to express wonder.

"And no one knows how I have studied the works of western philosophical men. Harmless fireworks, astral telescopes, and my quaint helio-copter, the Demon Dragonfly?"

Mao Ping nodded as if he comprehended, but he had never heard some of those words before, and even if he had—

"They aren't toys at all," the Third Son said.

Looking toward the Third Son's torso, Mao Ping asked, "What are they?"

"Conceal your intentions or you'll always be a slave."

At that moment there was a soft knocking followed by a chorus of giggles from the hallway. The Third Son leaped to his feet and swept open his door to reveal a slender young woman wearing a veil; she was flanked by two elderly, nodding court beauticians. "My birthday present!" the Third Son proclaimed as he drew the girl in by a hand. "You all can leave. What? Stop giggling, ladies, and go away."

A floral perfume was filling the air, and as Mao Ping passed the Third Son, the beaming young prince said, "The consummation of my marriage, a political affair, won't be for some years. My betrothed lives in another city and is too tame for my purpose in life. So… Plum Blossom here is my first concubine. I picked her myself, a virgin."

Mao Ping felt as if his life force had abruptly taken wing and flown away, leaving him a dry, shrunken husk. Then in instant, when Mao Ping turned and looked the Third Son straight in the eye, eyes to eyes, the master stepped backwards and slumped, *his* joy extinguished, his whole body now reflecting the despair of the slave.

Mao Ping's feet rasped across the floor toward the exit.

"Oh…" the Third Son murmured, bowing to a slave for the first time ever. "I'm wrong for being insensitive to your loss of manhood. Please overlook my stupidity."

~

Months passed, and the Governor granted Mao Ping the annual fortnight to return to his home village for the slave's own birthday celebration, coinciding with the New Year, the Year of the Dragon. A

true celebration it was, because Mao Ping, as a resident of the Governor's house, was a celebrity in this poor farming community. He brought presents for his relatives and their neighbors, who were shocked and amazed at the ingenious puzzles, puppets, strings of firecrackers, squibs, hoops, tops, and music boxes, as well as practical gifts like hoes for his father and older brother and cooking pots for his mother. All of it carried on a wagon pulled by a retired warhorse.

Mao Ping's chief delight at home was his little sister—perky and precocious for a female. She was a pleasure not only because she was his one sister, but because girls were rare in his life. He gave her a rich silk robe of vermilion and gold, and a carved wooden sword. The next day, wearing her new robe and twirling her sword, she danced around their winter-bare cherry trees until her mother told her to stop.

One night of Mao Ping's holiday, a storm ravaged the rural land, the kind of storm to uproot trees, scatter homes and hayricks, overrun stream-banks, and drown water buffalo. Mao Ping lay awake in his closet bedroom, listening to the roar, and watching the lightning's brilliance through gaps in the exterior boards. He thought of what the Third Son had said about slavery and unimaginative explosions and noise. Despite the sure havoc that the storm was inflicting upon the neighborhood, Mao Ping's parents' house remained dry and snug, and in his heart, he thanked his ancestors for their protection.

By dim early morning, the last squalls of the storm were still blustering in the distance, and while he lounged half asleep on his old comfortable bed, Ping's sister ran to him and whispered, "Come and see. In the barn. A secret."

"Was it damaged from the storm?"

"The barn is fine. Your old warhorse is happy because I fed him. Papa says the winter wheat is ruined, and Mama says I'll have to go away soon—to a marvelous house." Her face was downcast.

Just what Mao Ping had always feared.

She led him by the hand, and inside the barn three shadowy packages seemed to vibrate of their own accord. Mao Ping recognized one of them; it was exactly like what he had brought to the Governor's house on the Third Son's birthday. The second looked familiar, too. He unwrapped their rain-beaded tarpaulins just enough to confirm his guesses. The third and largest package was like a bin of melons, and from it he detected a sulfurous odor.

His sister said, wonderingly, "What are these? Machines for the gardens, for irrigation?"

"They aren't for farming," Mao Ping said. "They're surprise birthday presents for me."

"Who brought them?"

"The wild storm."

"No, that's not true." She smiled. "You're telling me a story. An enormous dragon flew them here late last night. With my own ears I heard his leathery wings beating the air."

"You're right," he said, forcing a blank countenance.

"Wouldn't it be exciting to ride a dragon someday? The big crate smells like a squib, a monster squib. Are these toys?"

"They're not toys. We have to hide our intentions, understand? Will you travel to the northern capital with me and my master?"

"Why?"

"To manage armies and conduct battles." Mao Ping stepped to the elderly warhorse, who was still munching his feed, and patted the beast's muscular shoulder.

"To fight?" Her eyes glowed and she smiled again, her teeth white and perfect. "Now I know. The packages contain weapons." She raised a finger to her lips with, "Shhh," then said, "Will you also find me a decent husband someday?"

"Of course I will," he said, thinking once again of the Third Son, who though engaged, might well be inspired to marry an adventuresome girl close at hand, a consort to be a partner in his crusade and who would give him courageous sons and daughters. "And let's quietly leave for my city tonight with the horse and wagon and light some real fireworks. We must be effective and practical. I'll certainly need a helper."

His sister grunted as she tried to lift the crate.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, you do."

Mao Ping turned away to hide his sudden tears.

After a few moments, he sniffed and wiped his eyes.

He hadn't actually thrown a rock at the squat, square building on the day of his master's birthday, but he had let the Third Son think so. And later that night, Mao Ping hadn't been nearly as upset at a reminder of his castration as he was disappointed because a concubine could distract his master from his sister. But all along, he felt certain the Third Son would give him the model Demon Dragonfly in pity when the full-scale Demon *Dragon's* stealthy construction was finally completed.

And now, with the smaller model, he could train his little sister to fly a formidable apparatus of warfare.

"Be sure to pack your wooden sword and new silk robe," he said. "For fun, let's find where the enormous dragon landed."

"Okay," she said eagerly. "We'll follow these skid marks. Maybe he's still here!"

Mao Ping allowed himself a smile. Tomorrow he would finally

obliterate the hated building where they stole his manhood, but far more importantly, his elaborate, preposterous, and covert matchmaking scheme just might be beginning in earnest.

Concealing one's intention to escape from slavery? Quite so. The Third Son had no idea that Mao Ping was an expert.

END

Depriscience

As a child, our son Timothy told his teachers he was adopted. During adolescence, he wailed in misery, certain that his best friends had moved away. By age twenty, Timothy's grief sank into glum desolation, and he would lie on the bed all day, bemoaning an imaginary poverty. None of his therapists could free him from his flawed perception of loss.

Saying, "sign up or move out," my husband Bill and I finally pushed him into enrolling at the community college, where he takes literature courses. Now in his early twenties, Timothy sits at home reading novels or staring into the tropical fish tanks.

One Friday afternoon when I came home from work, I found him eating a bowl of ramen noodles at the breakfast counter.

"How's your day been?" I asked.

He pushed a paper toward me across the counter. The letter "A" and the word "Incredible!" were scrawled in red across the top.

"You won't want to read it," he said in a monotone. "It's the same stuff about my family and friends who disappeared."

I had stopped arguing with him years ago — stopped telling him in hysterical terms how we were his natural parents, that his memories were false, that he had not been robbed of a fortune and no one had abandoned him.

"Writing is a healthy outlet for you, Tim," I said.

He gently cleared his throat. "I suppose."

"I'd like to read it."

He just shrugged his shoulders, slid off the stool, and put his empty bowl into the dishwasher.

"Your dad and I plan to see Grandma Ostenson tomorrow at the hospice center," I said. "She won't be around much longer. Will you come with us?"

"Grandma Ostenson? Why? I never visit her."

"You won't have another chance."

"I mean, I don't even know her."

"My mother was troubled," I said.

Tim blinked like he usually did before an emotional episode. "She's barely aware. She's going to die when we get there, anyway."

"You'd be keeping us company."

He looked at me with something like pity for a needy stranger. "Yeah, I would be."

"Do you have plans for the weekend?"

He whisped air from his nose at my absurd question.

"Well," I said, "I'm putting my feet up for a few minutes before I start supper. What would you like?"

"Nothing. But thanks."

I took Timothy's paper upstairs, thinking that I'd fall asleep during the second paragraph, but I didn't. Instead, I moved to the window for better light. Ever since he was little, Tim had communicated his delusions, but never with such realism, and never with any rational perspective.

The prompt had been, "Your fountain of joy." Tim had written about a wife and children, a career as a novelist, acclaim from intelligent readers, pleasure in research and storytelling, satisfaction in hard physical work, and purpose from sharing life with others.

But the ending of the essay… The last paragraph said, "Only recently have I realized that the memories exist merely in my head, fixed there forever, as if a malicious scientist planted them to torture me, which means they will never give joy, but will always burden me with the pain of separation. My hope is that someday the pain will subside."

~

When we arrived at the hospice, Mom was propped up on pillows; her eyes were open and her breathing was labored. After a while, she said, "It's nice to see you."

I babbled on as if she understood every word. Between her catnaps she appeared to enjoy our company, especially Timothy, who sat next to her. When I mentioned his paper, she said, "Read it to me, please. Read it all."

"Sorry Mom, we didn't bring—" Bill said, but Timothy was pulling a copy from his pocket.

As Tim read, her mind seemed to open like an evening primrose and when he reached the end, she said, "I remember that story… I've seen it before."

"What do you see, Grandma?" Tim said.

She fumbled and took his hand. "Timmy?"

"Yes, Grandma."

"Dear child, it's a gift. Those people and experiences you feel are gone—they've not come to you yet. Your memories aren't memories. They're visions of your future. I had the same condition."

"We're clairvoyant?"

She nodded faintly. "Until I resigned myself to loss, real or not, I couldn't be thankful for the present… for the people in my life. I prevented my joyful future. Accept your losses, baby, even self-inflicted ones. Give and receive love."

She drifted into unconsciousness again and then stirred enough to say, "I wish I'd known you, I could have told you before. But, I'm

glad… you came to visit."

Timothy looked at his grandmother and blinked rapidly, her words working in him, maybe re-forming his life as we watched. He then gathered his father and me into his arms and cried unashamedly. We wept with him. At last when all this new grief was purged, we saw that my mom was gone, her breath stilled, her face serene.

We watched in silence until Bill said, "Tim, go tell them at the desk, okay?"

After Tim rinsed his face and left, I asked Bill, "What do you think about the family gift?"

He touched Mom's hand and sighed. "I'm not sure. You don't have it."

I walked to the door. Down the hallway, Tim was leaning against the counter at the nurses' station.

A minute later he returned, his face wearing an allusion to a smile. "They'll be here soon," he said. "No hurry." Another silent moment passed until Timothy said, "What's the name of the duty nurse? The young one. Brunette."

"Margaret," I said. "She's vivacious, isn't she?"

"She looks familiar."

"She likes good literature, Tim," my husband said.

Timothy blinked and said, his voice caught between a sob and a laugh, "Yeah, I know."

END

Spark

"Welcome to the edge of the universe," I said cheerfully. "The very edge."

The clutch of tourists easing into my parents' store seemed overawed. At night, part of our sky is lit with nebulae, pulsars, galaxy clusters, and all sorts of stuff, but the rest of the sky is black, pitch black. As far as anyone knows, no electromagnetic phenomena, gravity, or nothing ever emanates from out there.

"We're stocked with souvenirs, snacks, drinks, contraband cigarettes, and camping supplies at wallet gouging prices," I said as the customers fanned out among the aisles. "Hot showers cost a fortune per minute."

"Excuse me, young fellow. Postcards?" the sweet little grandma asked.

I stepped around the counter to show her the rack for our best seller: a jet black card with the caption 'Beyond the Horizon'.

"I'd like a dozen," she murmured to herself.

Tourists. I don't figure what they've come to see, but they know how to spend.

"Where's the hotel?" a man in a sweater and shorts asked.

"Our planet doesn't have hotels, sir, since it's a park, except for the few concessionaires like us. If you want a room, you'll have to stay a parsec or two closer toward the Center."

"That's too bad," he said. "We've come so far already."

"We have plenty of camping spaces," I said. "Campers bring lawn chairs, extra blankets, and sit up all night staring into the dark void."

"Do you rent gear?"

"Whatever you need."

~

Early in the offseason, two of my school buddies thought we should take an adventure. Dad owns a junker Galaxship that once carried the mail, so my friends and I took it apart, cleaned everything, recharged the quantum cells, put it back together with the safeties disabled, and loaded up all the canned beans, frozen steak, citrus concentrate, and beer it could hold. We charted a course directly away from the Center and launched.

At first it was fun. I mean, because even scientists never attempt this. Before long it got boring, but honestly, when we weren't lifting weights and watching movies, or playing video games, we slept. Outside, absolutely everywhere was black, black, black as we traveled four years as close to c^2 as we dared.

Then one of my buddies, Janos, said, “We should stop.” So we did, and other than the ship not rattling and shaking, we’d have hardly known. We looked homeward to find that the universe had shrunk to an infinitesimal spark of light.

“Holy Higgs Boson!” Janos said. “We flew faster than we thought.”

I took a picture.

A quiet minute afterwards, my other buddy, Rasper, said, “I’m scared. Let’s go back now.” So, we did. The tiny dot of the universe grew until four years later (minus a month) our planet emerged into view.

When I walked into the store, Mom asked, “How was it?”

“Okay. I’m glad to be home. It’s not so bad here.”

“That’s how I felt,” Dad said. “You’re just in time. The tourist crush begins this weekend.”

Anyway, that picture I took of our infinitesimal spark? We couldn’t decide on a caption, but we make a ton of money from the new post-card regardless. Maybe, just maybe I can now afford to go someplace really fantastic and astonishing, like Auntie Katum’s for a slice of her famous blueberry pie.

END

The Cruller Twist

A bright spring noon and there's Nicole, brunette and as trim as I remember her, sitting at the café table along the sidewalk. "Lauren!" she says and jumps up. "Wow. So glad you came. What a wonderful reunion for my birthday."

We hug and I say to her, "You look so good, Nicole."

"You do, too."

"I can't believe it's been, how many? Five years since graduation?"

"Yeah!" Nicole says. "We're really looking forward to your concert tonight."

"My first in Asheville. Here's a… here's a present for you. I hope it's not too big."

Nicole reaches into the decorative bag and lifts out a snowy white hoodie emblazoned with a Duke Blue Devil. "Perfect, it's perfect!" she says, holding it up.

We squirm into our chairs, order salads from the gorgeous, flirty waiter, and catch up on news. Lunch arrives in the middle of our relaxed talk about travel, classical vocal music, and a battle against weight for me; a semi-career, marriage, and children for Nicole.

"Sorry I couldn't come to your wedding," I say. "Oh, your birthday reminds me. Your twin brother. How's he doing?" Nicole had often spoken of Steve when she and I were roommates, and I always hoped to meet him.

"He's great. Though he'd rather be married by now. A girl he liked a lot shied away recently because of his medical condition. Did you hear he developed Type One diabetes in his final year of culinary school?"

"Nooo! What a cruel twist."

She gives me a wry, amused look. "Yeah, a cruel twist, especially since desserts, pastries, and candy were his passion. He always had a sweet tooth. He kept getting thinner and we thought it was his frantic schedule. Then one Friday he called home and said his vision was blurry. Mom and Dad thought it was eye strain and suggested he rest over the weekend and go to the campus clinic on Monday. The nurse knew right away—they see one or two late onset cases every year. They gave him insulin and sent him to an endocrinologist."

"He's okay?"

"He's on a pump and lives a disciplined life. Almost a normal life. It's a condition that could kill him, if he doesn't take care of himself. He could go blind or lose his legs."

The waiter reappears with the diabolical timing of his profession;

he whisks up our plates and asks, "Thinking dessert? We have a sinfully delectable chocolate cake today. A dark decadent cake with luscious raspberry sauce. You'll love it, I'm sure."

How clichéd, and bad even without the subtle innuendo in his voice. I shouldn't, and almost say yes, but Nicole speaks first. "Thanks, but no."

"Are you diabetic, too?" I ask her.

"Just saving for later."

The waiter turns to me. His attentive brown eyes might make me believe he cares.

"I'll take a piece."

"Good choice. Awesome," he says and glides away.

As I watch him disappear, the conversation pauses, a long caesura, a cessation in our duet, and I'm feeling buzzy and encumbered like I've eaten too much, like muscle memory from past indulgence. Nothing about this cake is right. I glance at Nicole who's watching me. In college she always was sensible in demeanor and secure in her relationships, but she still managed to be empathetic to me and must know what I'm feeling now. The waiter glides up, places the object before me, and moves to the next table.

"Guess what?" I say to Nicole, "Changed my mind. I'll wait until later, too."

"Good choice," she says, with a sigh, as if I had nearly failed an easy exam.

She knows the subtext from our college years. Not long ago I would have offered this waiter my latest CD, or left it as a tip with my card, an invitation to drinks in my hotel room…

We pay the bill, stroll along the sidewalks, peer into antique shops, stare at the weird and fascinating pedestrians, admire the eccentric architecture, and breathe the breezy mountain air.

Nicole stops to send a text message. "Just touching base with hubby," she says.

On a corner I drop a twenty for the fiddlers playing earthy Swedish tunes. "Your brother," I say at last. "Did he finish culinary school?"

"The diabetes set him back, but he graduated with his class. He took an incomplete that he made up later."

"So, what's he doing now? Did he change focus?" With this, I'm certain Nicole has finally caught my interest.

She only grins and I don't understand. She keeps grinning. Then I see behind her into a window full of pastries and chocolates, the window with the shop's name painted on the glass. The tables inside are crowded with people sipping from cups and munching food. Nicole is already opening the door, and the charming bell atop issues a soprano

trill. A fruity, caramel aroma pours from the doorway.

What an odd coincidence, our being right here, The *Cruller* Twist.

Noisy chatter with a backdrop of music, a cello sonata. “Welcome girls,” the man in fashionable dusty white says as he steps away from some customers. He looks good, better than Nicole—a masculine version of her—and taller. He’s wearing glasses and hasn’t shaved since yesterday. “Happy birthday, dear sister. I have something special for you.” He bends to kiss Nicole, leaving her with a floury cheek. “I’m Steve,” he says in a quieter tone and takes my wilted hand.

“I’m Lauren.”

Nicole and I slide into a corner booth, and he waltzes up with two plates of a divine miracle, a lit candle placed in one of the portions. “All organic,” he says. “You’ll have to help me, Lauren. Tell me if anything’s wrong, because I seldom taste anymore. Not even my sugar-free treats. It makes abstinence easier. Like the deaf composer, don’t you think? The celibate priest who conducts weddings.”

Nicole takes a breath for her candle.

“Wait. Wait,” he says. “Let me grab some toasted pecans, another candle, and I’ll join you. Coffee, Lauren? I hear you’re a singer.”

The poor soprano up front trills again, and in maneuvers an athletic guy with a toddling cherub at his hand and a chubby cherub in a backpack. All smiles, they approach our corner. “Surprise!” the guy says. The toddler climbs into Nicole’s lap and blows out her candle.

Surely, this is paradise. Right place, right dessert, and Steve—a man with generous self-control. I wonder if Nicole would have brought me here if I had eaten the cake back at the café.

It’s not my birthday, but I make a wish.

END

Just Cold

When the doorbell rang, Mr. Reynolds went to answer. The young man on the front steps popped open a beer can he had pulled from his ragged, oversized coat. "Are you on the wagon?" he asked, and offered Mr. Reynolds the first slug.

"Lee," Mrs. Reynolds called from behind her husband. "It's freezing outside. The chowder? The children are hungry."

"We're sitting down for supper," Mr. Reynolds said to the boy. "What, what's your name?"

"Jeffrey. I've got some peanuts. Give them to your kids." He set the beer down and fumbled at his coat. "That's a nice manger scene in your yard. It's like *real*."

Mr. Reynolds gently closed the door, which made a soft click. He looked at his wife and said, "That was awkward."

"Maybe we should invite him in."

"You didn't smell him."

"I guess there's always the homeless shelter."

The Reynolds family resumed their happy Christmas Eve meal, and afterwards, Mrs. Reynolds passed around a tray of fancy dried pears.

Then the doorbell rang again.

"It's probably our malodorous friend." This time Mr. Reynolds peeked through the curtains first. "Oh!" he said, stepping backwards. "The police." He jerked the door open.

The officer was watching the darkening sky. "Sorry to disturb you, but we've had a call from one of your neighbors about a guy bothering people."

"He left here twenty minutes ago."

"You won't arrest him, will you?" Mrs. Reynolds asked.

"We'll just drop him at the shelter. It'll be a bitter cold one tonight. By the way, this was on your stoop."

Mr. Reynolds took the unopened bag of unshelled peanuts.

"What's malodorous mean?" the oldest child, Lacy, asked.

~

The next morning while it was still dark, the Reynolds children jumped out of bed to empty their stockings. They found candy canes, flashlight batteries, walnuts, and new pocketknives. Mrs. Reynolds had prepared cinnamon rolls, eggs and sausage, and a fresh fruit salad for breakfast.

Mr. Reynolds built a fire in the fireplace. "Before we eat, let's read

about the wise men bringing presents, because they're why we give gifts at Christmas. And let's bundle up and read at our nativity display."

"You realize it's ten degrees," Mrs. Reynolds said.

"We won't be long."

The children donned warm coats, hats, and gloves. The frigid air outside stung their noses, and heavy, lowering clouds oppressed them. Lacy ran to the stable, stopped, and screamed. "A dead person! A body!" She screamed again, stumbled backward, and fell.

Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds sped from the house.

"Where?" Mr. Reynolds said somberly. He moved closer and with forced calm said, "Take the children indoors, dear." He dialed 911, and knelt by the body. It was Jeffrey curled up in the straw right next to the manger with baby Jesus inside. Jeffrey had borrowed a shepherd's cloak for a pillow. He lay rigid and unmoving…

When the glittering ambulance rolled in, neighbors gathered at the edge of the yard. A cloud of steam ascended from their midst, their combined breath. A few snowflakes drifted down.

Wearing a Santa hat and carrying a red duffel bag, a paramedic approached the victim. As a second paramedic arrived, his stretcher jingling with bells, the first paramedic rubbed Jeffrey hard on the chest. No response. He felt for a pulse and said, "We'll need a body bag." He bent down to check for respiration. While he listened, his stern expression melted into puzzlement; he straightened up and said, "What the…?"

Jeffrey opened his eyes, sat up, and looked around, amazed.

"How? How are you feeling?" the paramedic asked.

Jeffrey only shivered.

"Get a blanket," the paramedic said to his partner. "Sir, I'll need to ask you some questions to ascertain your alertness. What day is it?"

Jeffrey thought for a moment, then slurred, "Christmas."

"Where are you?"

"Bethlehem."

"Who is the presi— Never mind. We need to transport you to the hospital. You've spent a night outdoors and you're probably hypothermic."

"Don't want the hospital. I'm just cold."

"He can come in our house," Mr. Reynolds said eagerly. "Bring him inside."

"You should go to the hospital, but we can't force you."

"The house, if it's okay."

The paramedic turned to Mr. Reynolds. "Are you sure?"

Mr. Reynolds glanced around at his nativity scene. He drew one

deep breath and another. A tremble seized him and he covered his eyes with the back of his forearm, as if he could hide.

Jeffrey struggled to stand, but couldn't and quit. "I know, I'm a nuisance and probably dangerous. The hospital, then."

"No, no. Jeffrey, I'm sorry I shut the door on you last night. It was wrong. Please, please come inside."

Jeffrey smiled a slow, stiff smile.

The paramedics helped him to his feet, and the neighbors cheered and hurried toward their comfortable homes. The Reynolds children dashed out, tucked themselves under Jeffrey's arms, and boosted him along.

The second paramedic smirked and whispered to the first, "A body bag? You're losing your edge."

"I'd swear the patient was dead," the first said quietly. "He was a refrigerated corpse."

"A miracle?"

"A mystery."

"You didn't notice the glowing plastic angel? All right, let's go. Busy morning."

"Thanks!" Mr. Reynolds called to them.

"Nothing else we'd rather be doing," one called back.

Mrs. Reynolds ushered Jeffrey and the children into the den, with its colorful decorated tree, the bright blazing fire, and treasures spread across the floor. They seated Jeffrey in the largest, coziest chair and pulled off his stinky boots. Mrs. Reynolds brought a mug of hot chocolate.

A quiet minute passed. Jeffrey hummed a sound of contentment and slurped at his steaming chocolate. The fire crackled cheerfully in the fireplace.

"Umm… Will, umm," Mr. Reynolds stammered. "Will you join us for breakfast? And afterwards when we open presents? We ah… have something for you. A present, or two."

"That'd be nice," Jeffrey said in a sigh. "How about a hot bath first? Any peanuts? *Boiled* peanuts?"

Mr. Reynolds scowled. Now *this* was awkward.

END

Turtle of the World (jtb 1)

"Where's Mrs. Barefoot?"

Those were the first words radio celebrity and paranormal investigator Jonathan T. Barron said when I collected him at the Asheville airport. If you don't know, he's the famous host of the syndicated program, Strange Days Radio.

"Umm," I said. "My wife divorced me last year on my 27th birthday. No kids. Ahh… *Oh*, my *aunt* teaches at the Cherokee reservation. She couldn't find a substitute for her classes, so, I'm your driver. I'm Carnley Barefoot. May I have your autograph?"

He pushed aside my notebook and pen. "Carnley, later on, please. Help with my luggage, will you?"

"She ain't never married."

"Who?"

"My Aunt Ilana. *Miss* Ilana Barefoot."

On our drive to my home turf of Robbinsville, south of the Great Smoky Mountains Park, I was in awe. Jonathan T. Barron in my 2010 Ford pick-em-up truck—it's my Aunt Ilana's actually. Me and her are his biggest fans in North Carolina. You wouldn't believe—

"Barefoot," he said. "Is your last name traditional Cherokee?"

"Everybody thinks so, but it's Scots."

"Ms. Barefoot wrote to me about the strange happenings at the Swan Mountain Retreat Center. She said they portend the end of all humanity."

"Holy Moley! The end of all humanity?" I pulled off to the side and a car blared its horn as it flew by. "She never told *me*. It's worse than I guessed."

"You don't think she exaggerated?"

I shook my head. "Mr. Barron. Be real careful there. My aunt *never* exaggerates. The end of humanity. Whew." I put the truck in gear and resumed our drive.

"O-kay," he said. "Trash raided, dogs and cats eaten, mangled birds lying on the ground, the larder broken into and food stolen. Wild screams in the darkness." He removed a photograph from his pocket and flashed it to me. "What do you think this is?"

"Well. I took that picture—I work on the buildings and grounds at the retreat center. We thought it might be bears, or maybe possums or a mountain lion, so I set up a game cam, a hunter camera. I believe it's a product of a government experiment, mixing humans with animal genes."

"Really? A chimera? You don't think it's a cousin to Bigfoot,

maybe a heretofore unknown native ape, an ape with these large white eyes?"

"No sir. It's a government conspiracy—to breed human weapons, better fighters. Some escaped from the federal compound in Andrews. The place is still down there, and fully operational. Black helicopters flying in and out all the time. That whole Eric Rudolph bomber deal? They made everyone believe their phones was tapped. But it was cover for building their laboratories. It's all on the shortwave broadcasts. Did I tell you I'm a ham radio operator?"

Mr. Barron glanced at me sideways and went dumb for a time. Later on I chanced, "I've got photographs of the fed's compound. I could take you there."

"We'll see," he said, and I heard skepticism. Dang. I thought he'd be different from other people.

On the curvy road along Fontana Lake, just past the yellow warning sign that says, "Fallen Rocks," we rounded a bend, and ahead was an old Indian guy standing beside the road. As we neared him, a stray gust full of leaves and swirling roadside litter hit him in the face. He tried to step away, but flipped backwards over the guardrail and disappeared on yonder side. I quick pulled over at a wide spot on the shoulder, before the rocky cliffs. Mr. Barron ran to see what became of the man, and I did, too. He was lying on his back.

"Chief Fallen Rocks, himself," I said over Mr. Barron's shoulder.

He looked back at me. "*What* are you talking about?"

"The road sign?"

Mr. Barron frowned and then helped the man to his feet and asked how he did.

"Not bad, not bad," the Chief said. "It was a comfortable place to rest. The world feels empty."

A smell of digested alcohol wafted into our faces.

"Can I take you someplace?" Mr. Barron asked.

"I live up the road a way."

It's forest and water everywhere around there. We drove a short bit and turned up a dirt drive to a well-kept double-wide, a nice Toyota Sequoia SUV parked beside it. Mr. Barron and I walked him inside.

"I never got your name," Mr. Barron said.

"Chief Fallen Rocks."

Mr. Barron turned cherry red. "We're sorry," he said, glaring at me. "We thought you were unconscious."

"My name is George Mankiller, but falling rocks have killed men at those cliffs above the road. My ancestors were hereditary chiefs."

"You're Cherokee?"

"Full-blood."

"You don't live on the reservation."

"I moved away a year ago. The reservation—it's private land called the Qualla Boundary—and the casino money were stealing my initiative. I want to set a better example for our people. Do you know about the epidemic suicide rate among Native American young people?"

"I see. Well, Mr. Mankiller—"

"I'm George."

"George, we must be going."

"Wait, wait a minute."

The Chief stepped to a rough shelf piled with carvings and lifted one of them, it the size of a salad plate. The carving was a turtle with a woman creature on its back. "I make these to sell to tourist shops, decent shops that carry authentic Native American stuff, not cheap China trash. The quality of my work isn't exquisite, but the grain and color of the wood is elegant, elegant enough. Take this as a gift."

"The detail and finish are very fine," Mr. Barron said. "It's too rich to give away." He took out his wallet.

"No, no. You've already paid."

They argued around and around. In the end, however, the Chief was stronger.

Back in Aunt Ilana's Ford pickup, Mr. Barron scowled. "Don't *ever* refer to him as Chief Fallen Rocks again. It's degrading. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

~

The Swan Mountain Hipster Center was up a narrow hollow that followed the curves of Rattlers Creek. We passed the carved sign along the highway and continued up the narrow asphalt road. Where the creek meandered through a wide flat cove surrounded by high ridges, we pulled up to a log building labeled "Office". Mr. Barron looked up toward the rock-boned ridges and I said, "Yes, sir, there's ginseng all over them woods, and behind the hills, the wild Russian boars roam."

A woman with a long grey ponytail stalked out of the office. "Hello Carnley," she said. "Run over any squirrels lately?"

"No ma'am, squirrels are-n't in season right now. It's spring. They're having their babies." Ms. Haversham doesn't like country-boy rednecks like me, and I give her a hard time. "Miss Haversham, this is Jonathan T. Barron."

"Mr. Barron, I don't know what you'll find here in the way of the supernatural, but you're welcome to enjoy our *natural* retreat center. Carnley will give you a tour. Make sure he shows you the meditation pool farther up the creek."

"Yes, sir," I said, "you don't want to miss that."

"And Carnley, while you're there, remove the Clemson ball cap from the Buddha, and please be sure to haul the recycling to the landfill, and finish the brush cutting. We have an Herbal Healing Conference coming in for the weekend. Mr. Barron, we have you in Cabin 9 at the top. Please, please do not disturb our other visitors. Silence is powerful." And with that, she turned on a dime and retreated into her office.

"She's really sweet," I said and stretched my back.

"I'm sure of it," he said, with that skeptical look of his. "A Clemson ball cap?"

"My alma matter. Go Tigers."

"What was your major?"

"Ummm… art. But I had to quit my first semester. Partied too much."

~

Someone was shaking me as I slept on my cot at the old maintenance building. "Carnley… Carnley… wake up."

I cracked open my eyes to see Jonathan Barron looming over me in the pale smudge of early morning light.

"What do you want?" I asked surly-like.

He flicked on the overhead, and as groggy and blinded as I was, I saw that he weren't afraid, but excited, elated even, and wearing his jacket. I asked, "Did you find my jar of moonshine in your cabin? I heard the ladies hid—"

"Get dressed," he ordered. "We need to see George Mankiller."

For a man who makes his living by talking, Mr. Barron was constipated as to words while we drove to the Chief's house. The sun remained hidden behind the ridge and pinked the springy clouds to the west. He refused to answer my questions and asked if I had faked the photograph of the mountain ape.

"Nope."

He shook his head and muttered, "She's beautiful, so beautiful, but sad. A forlorn succubus."

A what? He couldn't have meant Ms. Haversham. Had she been sleepwalking in her nightie?

The Chief was not at his double-wide when we arrived, but an Indian in a police uniform pulled up in the nice Toyota Sequoia as we were about to leave. When he got out of the vehicle, I noticed the holstered gun at his side.

"Good morning Mr. Mankiller," Mr. Barron said, "Your carving. A turtle with a feminine form reclining on its back. What can you tell me about the carving? Its meaning."

I hadn't recognized the Chief—he'd been transformed. He saw me

staring and gave a severe look and said, “I’m an on-call security guard. Usually I work at a pawnshop in Murphy, but last night I did an extra shift in Franklin. All night. Son, when you picked me up along the road, it was my first whiskey drunk in 43 years—since Viet Nam—and it will be my last.”

The Chief now turned to Mr. Barron. “There’s a reason you want to know about my carving.”

“Look at these photographs. Carnley set up game cameras at the Swan Mountain Retreat Center, thinking that a wild animal was attacking and killing their dogs and cats, and was stealing food from their kitchen. Instead he captured these images.”

The Chief nodded wisely as he shuffled between the pictures.

“And last night,” Mr. Barron continued, “I took these other photographs of this ghost-like being. She bears a resemblance to the creature on the back of your turtle.”

The Chief held the second group of photos in his steady hands, and as I peered over his shoulder, my knees quivered. For what I saw scared me. One of the new pictures showed a form, like a dark-haired girl, clothed in a silky, shaggy nightgown. And then, as if my eyes were playing tricks, or like them holographic anatomy posters at the doctor’s office that change when you move your head, the figure turned into a seven-foot hemlock tree. Then it transformed back into a girl again.

“Is there any relationship between the girlish being in this photo and the monster with white eyes in the first group of photos?” Mr. Barron asked.

The Chief walked up the steps to his double-wide and sat on a rocker on the deck. He glanced up to where sky showed through the trees on the ridge, which had no leaves out yet, but I knew he wasn’t seeing. As I watched him, his mystery expression cleared like a muddy, disturbed pool does when the fresh water pours in.

“Are you ready to understand the turtle and its burden?” he said at last.

“I don’t know,” Mr. Barron said.

“I didn’t think so.” After a pause, Chief said, “The turtle is carved from hemlock wood, from the hemlock tree.”

“Hemlock?”

I was fearful to utter a word, and the Chief said, “You don’t know the hemlock tree? You drive and I’ll give directions. I’ll buy you some coffee. You want coffee?”

The Chief fetched a duffel bag and we drove in Aunt’s truck to Robbinsville and stopped for coffee. After that, the road passed through brown forest tinged with red and gold of tree buds, and the green of swelling leaves until we arrived at the Kilmer Memorial Forest. From

the parking lot we followed a path along a creek until the Chief stopped and pointed. Our gaze traveled up.

"It's dead," he said about the towering, bare-branchy column before us, its mahogany inner bark exposed, outer bark lying in heaps around its base.

"It can't be." Mr. Barron craned his neck up and down. He took a camera from his pocket and shot some pictures. "How many people would it take to reach all the way around the trunk?"

"Five of your wingspan. But look." The Chief swept his arms in a panorama.

Mr. Barron and me turned and saw dozens of red trunks.

"They're all dead," I said.

"The world feels empty. No one thinks about how much we've lost. No one cares. This forest has never been logged, and these trees were centuries old. I often come here to collect wood for my carvings—the Forest Service downed a dead tree for me."

Mr. Barron sat on a rock and considered for a long while. The Chief pulled out a knife and began carving a stick of ironwood he had in his pocket. I watched three squirrels playing tag on a giant Tulip Poplar trunk. Finally Mr. Barron said, "Have you ever heard of dryads? Spirits associated with living trees?"

"I've seen them," the Chief said. "We call trees 'the Standing People', but they are more. When I was a child in the Qualla Boundary, our school teacher brought us here for a field trip and I saw them. No one else did—they were like clouds of flower petals swirling with the wind during a rainstorm. Not only hemlock spirits, but of the other trees, too. This forest was full of life. In all my walks since then, in the Smoky National Park and elsewhere, I never saw them again, but I felt their presence and heard them. They gave me joy."

I worked up the courage to ask, "What about them white-eyed monsters?"

The Chief glowered and said, "Woolly adelgids are like white eyes. They're an insect that covers the stems of hemlocks with tiny cottony, woolly balls. They invaded from China and are killing all the hemlocks—the ones not treated. That's why these trees are all dead, Mr. Barron, Carnley. I didn't fall over the guardrail. I was pushed by a monster with white eyes and hair like horns." He let out a big sigh. "Let's leave now. I can hear the Tulip Poplar, those huge trees are alive, but the forest is half dead, half silent, and I'm depressed."

"We have live hemlocks at Swan Mountain," I said, expecting the Chief to take my scalp off. "I treated them for woolly adelgids myself. It was my job. Poured the chemical on the roots of the big ones. Sprayed the small ones with insecticidal soap."

Mr. Barron and the Chief looked at each other like they thought the same idea at the same time.

"Will you take me to the retreat center?" the Chief asked.

"Why not?" I said. "My Aunt Ilana told me you can grow medicinal mushrooms on hemlock wood. I should tell Ms. Haversham. She'll love hearing it."

~

Back at Swan Mountain, the Chief walked around and said the place swarmed with hemlock spirits, but they were sick—they'd been poisoned by my chemical treatments. After that, he slept the rest of the day away in Mr. Barron's cabin. I had chores because of the group coming in.

Mr. Barron talked with Aunt Ilana on the phone. It was a Friday and she planned to come over Saturday morning and bring materials we might find helpful. In case you didn't know, she volunteers at the Cherokee museum. Mr. Barron set up more night video cameras to catch another tree spirit or one of them monsters in action.

Later in the afternoon, the guests began arriving for their Sing for Peace Rally, or whatever. Herbal Healing. That's it. The Chief woke from his nap and asked me for a ride home so he could get ready for the pawn shop, but the shop called to say they were locking up early—some kind of trouble there. They needed him right away.

When driving to the Chief's double-wide, two cars overtook us, a van and a sedan, actually, and passed us on a curve at a high rate of speed, the van riding close to the sedan's butt. I shook my fist out the window and shouted unprintable remarks about inbred livestock. When we rounded the curve, the van was in the ditch on its side, and two jackasses from the sedan were popping at it with a rifle and a shotgun.

I stopped dead in the road right there.

Someone clambered from the van and started firing back at the other men, who dove for cover.

"Oh my Lord," the Chief exclaimed. "Let's get out of here." I noticed he had his pistol in hand. I backed up 100 yards and we heard and felt an explosion.

"We'd have to drive clear around Santeetlah Lake to get to your place by another route, Chief," I said, trembling like a beech leaf in winter. "It'd take another hour."

"I know," he said, now calm. (He's a funny guy.) "I'm calling 911." The phone to his ear, the Chief took on a blank look.

"What's happening?"

"A recording. It says there's civil unrest in progress in western North Carolina. What does that mean, a war? 'Everyone should stay calm, stay home and protect yourselves. The government will restore

order by Saturday morning.' I'll bet." He then looked at me sternly. "My name is George Mankiller."

"You said that before."

"You just called me 'Chief'."

"I did?"

"In Vietnam I killed men for less."

For a second I thought he might kill me, then he laughed. "Don't worry, son. 'Chief' doesn't bother me. Have you got a gun and ammunition with you?"

I wobbled my head up and down. "A shotgun. Why not? But don't tell them hipster ladies."

"Get it out."

"It's the end of all humanity."

~

We reached the center without further trouble, meaning, at a stop sign when Mr. Mankiller brandished my black tactical shotgun, a pair of likely fellows who might have robbed us, reconsidered.

Ms. Haversham greeted us with a worried, twitchy expression—she almost appeared human. "Your aunt arrived a few minutes ago," she said. "She's quite upset. School let out early. Apparently there was a riot in the town of Cherokee and she decided to come now. She's resting in Mr. Barron's cabin. If you're staying, Mr. Mankiller, I'm afraid you'll have to bunk there, too. We are at capacity this weekend for the Herbal Conference."

The sky had taken on a strange subdued glow, with thick lowering clouds overhead. "I believe we've lost an hour of day," I said.

"There's a storm approaching," Ms. Haversham said. "A tornado watch is in effect. We're serving dinner in the dining hall for a few more minutes, so if you want to eat, you should hurry. Carnley, you have your radio?" She meant my handheld, not my ham, which is housed in my storage shack above the mental blankness pond. I have a power generator, too, in case of a zombie apocalypse or whatever.

"Do you have your radio?" she repeated.

"Yes sir, I mean ma'am."

We loaded up carryout boxes from the main kitchen and took them to Cabin 9—more a bunkhouse than a cabin—sleeps 16, in fact. But it has a cooking stove. Aunt Ilana was lounging in a cozy chair near the fireplace, with her eyes half-closed, a blanket over her legs, a mug of tea beside her. Her dark hair, usually done in a bun, was let down. Mr. Barron was bent over the big dining table with maps or charts, and photographs spread before him.

He came up to us and spoke in a low, exultant voice. "We know more about the connection between the dryads and the white-eyed crea-

tures. Your aunt brought rubbings from Jaducal… "

"Judaculla Rock," she said faintly from the chair.

"Judaculla Rock," Mr. Barron repeated, then whispered, "Your Aunt Ilana is so young, younger than you, Carnley. Not yet 30, for sure. And pretty. Brown eyes. Is she married?"

"No, she's not," I breathed out with true respect. "I told you already, but we're not so certain of her age. She eats a seed diet and ain't nobody smart enough for her."

"Where would she find an intelligent man around here?" Mr. Mankiller whispered.

"Or, one with good manners," she said robustly.

"I'm sorry," I said. "We thought you was asleep. Aunt Barefoot, may I introduce Chief, I mean Mr. George Mankiller—you've already traded names with your hero, Mr. Barron, I presume."

She jumped from the chair and shook the Chief's hand. She was still wearing her teacher's outfit—a skirt and blouse topped by a green sweater and tailored for her slim figure—but not too slim. "George and I are already acquainted. He's helped out a great deal at the museum, and we sell his carvings at the arts and crafts store."

"From putting our heads together about Jad— Judaculla Rock," Mr. Barron said, "this is what we concluded. Let's sit down. Carnley, would you mind bringing us coffee? I made a pot."

When I appeared with full coffee cups, Aunt was saying, "So, Judaculla is the name of a legendary monster who leaps from mountain to mountain. The rock of talc stone supposedly marks his territory. Possibly he is pure invention, or possibly he's based on true stories of a Sasquatch-like being. Stylized engravings on Judaculla Rock resemble the monster in the photographs, but the fascinating part is, we also find engravings showing the Standing People spirits transitioning into the monster. In other words, the monsters are the tree spirits in another form."

"Judaculla is the name Sequoyah gave to the giant Goliath in the Cherokee translation of the Bible," the Chief said.

Everyone stared at the confused carvings in the photos for a few moments, moments that stretched into minutes of mental blankness. At last I said, "Would anyone like popcorn to go with their coffee?"

When the storm fell on us like a dam bursting, not only was I in the dark because the electric quit, the racket was so loud I couldn't hear the popcorn popping. We cook with profane gas at the Center, so, I just kept shaking the pan and knew on instinct when it was done. Turned out a fine batch.

Just as I handed bowls around with the help of a flashlight, Ms. Haversham's voice screeched over my handheld radio.

"Carnley, get your rain clothes on and walk our visitors to the Great Hall. One cabin at a time. We're distributing LED lamps down here. Nobody has power, and the ladies are scared."

"All of them? Walk all them ladies? How many?"

"We have 83 guests. A few will need to be driven."

"I'll use the bus, for everyone. It's too wet for walking."

If the ladies—and the men guests, too—were scared by the dark, they were petrified by the lashing squalls of rain and the torrents of muddy water running over the road as I drove them load-by-load to the Great Hall. Even with umbrellas, many were soaked to the bone. The Chief lit a fire in the yawning fireplace and I pulled out blankets and old sleeping bags and mattresses from the basement. Aunt and Mr. Barron settled into rockers, a thick blanket a piece.

Storms in the mountains follow a pattern. Unless they're hurricane fed, they kick up a fuss for a while and they're done. This storm started loud and heavy and grew worse. Thunder exploded over our heads and crackled on and on. The ladies, and men too, screamed and then after awhile only moaned in anguish. And I thought they loved ole Mother Nature. The lightning strobed with the thunder, taking on a cadence like a fire and brimstone preacher does, and I dozed off until new sounds disturbed my suede unconsciousness, sounds from outside, like of battle. The wind surged, thrashing the trees, and we heard roars, long shrieks, wailing, and keening. Then came a colossal crash which jarred the whole building and renewed the screaming from the guests.

"Carnley, see what hit us," Ms. Haversham said, shaking where she stood, though I didn't know if it was her or the floor. I threw on a poncho and, happening to see a bicycle helmet, I put that on, too, and went outside. The whole universe seethed in motion, the air full of flying water, unknown objects—leaves and branches, I guess. Raindrops stung my eyes. I immediately slipped and fell. The ground was covered in slimy things. Fish. Dead fish.

Holy Moley!

Hanging on to the shrubbery, I worked around to the uphill side of the Great Hall, where the crash had been, and found a gigantic rock braced against the wall, now partly caved in. The rock had rolled or slid there. I breathed for a minute and was picking my way back to the door when some running thing slammed into me, knocking me flat, my face mashed into a fish. I rose up to hands and knees, and looking around I saw animated shadows, hairy upright shadows with glowing white eyes stalking amidst the chaos, rolling dumpsters, uprooting small trees, and tossing boulders. Nearby, three of them was wrestling in a heap. They smelled like rotting corpses. I crawled to the door and banged on it to be let back in.

When Ms. Haversham opened up and saw me and the mayhem, she grew pale, then paler. She jerked me inside, slammed the door, and ordered dry clothes and blankets. She put her arm around my back and guided me to the fireplace and then brought some hot cider. When the clothes arrived, I changed somehow, made it back to the hearth, and fell asleep on the floor.

~

In the morning when I woke up (a pillow under my head), I smelled coffee, bacon, and eggs. Well… if truth be told, I only fantasized the bacon. Ms. Haversham and a few intrepid guests had contrived to cook. She brought me a tray with the breakfast that I wolfed down. About then Mr. Barron and Aunt promenaded into the Great Hall. Ms. Haversham pulled open the curtains of the big windows and I recoiled at the bright light. Except for threads of fog and scattered broken clouds, the sky was as blue as blue. I put my tray down and stepped closer to the window. The trees on the long slope up to the ridge had mangled and broken tops. The ground—the planted areas and grass—as much as I could see through ripped leaves and sticks, looked like it had been plowed by a herd of wild pigs—pigs which had partly eaten the fish from the sky.

Aunt Ilana came and stood next to me. "We can't find Mr. Mankiller," she said. "Nobody has seen him since he built the fire last night."

"Then, who's that?" I asked.

A reddish male person wearing leather leggings, a kind of loincloth, and no shirt was picking a path across the flotsam toward the Great Hall. His skin was dyed bright red except for a painted black band across his face like a raccoon. A couple wild turkey feathers waved from the top of his head and he carried an odd knobby club. Aunt, Mr. Barron, Ms. Haversham, me, and a few guests ran outside to meet him.

"Mr. Mankiller," Ms. Haversham said, "What are you wearing?"

"My clothes. What are *you* wearing?"

She looked down at herself, at her ordinary blouse and pants, but she couldn't think of nothing to answer.

"I talked to them," he said. "I talked to the Tsuga spirits… to the Tsul'Kalu'. The storm washed woolly adelgids from the tree branches."

Oh my. Brandishing his wooden club and defying Goliaths in the middle of the storm? I was impressed.

~

But Chief wasn't willing to explain more, and besides we had other stuff to think about. Nobody was getting cell phone reception and Rattlers Creek roared and tossed across the road, so we couldn't get out. One of the men guests was having chest pains, so Chief had to see

about him. Aunt went to help the Chief.

Me and Mr. Barron walked up towards my quarters to crank the apocalypse generator and see what news we could hear on my ham rig. As we neared the meditation pond, we heard the rap, rap of helicopter rotors beating over the ridge, then one bird appeared and two more. I looked at Mr. Barron feeling self-satisfied and vindicated.

"I *told* you," I said. He took no notice.

The black choppers whistled overhead and across the opposite ridge, and as the last one ranged nearly out of view, it blew up in a ball of flame. We couldn't believe it. Mr. Barron staggered to a bench and eased himself down. I sat next to him and we stared out over the pond full of floating branches. Clouds of lacy bugs hovered over the water, a few dipping and touching the surface.

We both sighed at the same time.

"Your aunt wrote that this was about the end of humanity. I can see it happening, but I don't understand why."

"No idea, myself. What *do* you and Aunt Ilana discuss, anyway?"

"Not this. She won't elaborate about what she meant in her warning. How did she know what would happen? She's been giving me a history of the region. Logging and the forced exile of the Cherokee Nation. The early naturalist explorer, William Bartram."

"When it's the right time, she'll tell you."

We went on up to my shack. My antenna had been knocked down, so I strung up some wire and tried reaching first one and then another of my radio buddies who lived in the area, but they didn't answer.

"Should I call Earl?" I asked.

"Who's Earl?"

"He's my ex's beau, her fiancé. He's in Robbinsville. He usually won't talk with me." I got on his favorite radio frequency, or band. "Earl, are you out there? What going on? Earl?"

I waited. Even when the world was normal, it took a minute for Earl to stop being jealous.

"Hey Carnley," Earl said finally, but he was mumbling. "You still alive? I guess you're in an isolated area out there. How's it goin'?"

"I'm well, considering. You?"

"Same. Did you know Susie is havin' her baby? We've set a date to get married, finally."

"You better marry her, then, you son of a bitch."

"Carnley, please," Mr. Barron said and touched my arm. I don't know why, but I had an impulse to blast my ham set with a shotgun.

"Earl…" I said. "Earl, you still there?" There was another minute of silence.

"Carnley, we're here in my bunker. Susie and me. She's havin' a

baby—she's havin' it now. Right now. I mean right *now*!" To make his point stronger, Susie panted in the background and groaned.

Earl went on. "We're scared to make noise. I'm afraid to run my generator—and batteries won't last. There's a war going on, Carnley, a damn war. People are runnin' around with guns and axes, lightin' fires and lootin'. It's a feud, or a massacre, one outrage escalates to another far worse. It started at the casino, I heard. Breathe, dear. Even police went berserk. There are foragin' gangs. The governor activated the National Guard and even they became involved. Units are fightin' among themselves. Helicopters, Carnley, your spooky black helicopters. As far as I can tell, war's engulfed the western counties."

"How's your food and water, Earl?"

"Good, good. I need better ventilation. Hey Carnley, how's it where you are? Susie just said we might join you, if that's okay. We can't stay hunkered down here forever. We need to get out of town. Maybe we'll try at night."

"Sure, Earl. Sure."

"Wait," Earl said. We could hear muffled gunfire over the radio behind him. "Gotta go. If we show up, we'll wave a white flag from the edge of the woods. Don't shoot us."

"The creek is blocking the road, Earl," I said, but he was gone already.

We scanned through the frequencies and heard narration after narration, and it pretty much confirmed what Earl said. The only new thing was the feds had mobilized regular military to invade, more or less, to restore order. But they wouldn't arrive for a few days.

"Which might make it all worse," Mr. Barron said, and I agreed.

"There's one thing I wanted to ask Earl," he said. "I don't understand why he and your ex aren't affected by this madness. And why aren't we? Is it we've not been provoked? What kind of person is Earl?"

"Just an ordinary mountain redneck, like me. He does the same kind of work I do, sort of, and we used to have a business together."

"What kind of work?"

"Tree removal, firewood cutting and sales."

"Really?"

"Why not?" I said.

"What does he do now?"

"Same thing, only more advanced. He's got an Associates Degree in Horticulture. He does landscape design and installation."

"Does he treat hemlocks for woolly adelgids?"

"Why not?"

"Does he have any healthy hemlocks around his house?"

"The last I seen, why not? Some big ones. He lives next to a park."

"The city park has hemlocks?"

"Nope. It's a memorial park, a cemetery. He treated the hemlocks there."

"Is your radio still on?"

"Nope," I said.

"I'm still hearing gunfire."

We both listened.

"Dang," I said. "It's below the Great Hall."

We ran outside and the noise grew louder. Then I went back in and pulled out two gun bags, one with a carbine—the Chief still had my tactical shotgun—and a pistol with high-capacity magazines. I gave the carbine to Mr. Barron.

"What do I do with this?" he said.

"Okay…" As we trotted along, I gave him a 15-second shooting workshop. He looked at me with his trademarked skepticism and I said, "Point in safe direction until needed. Squeeze trigger. You'll be fine."

"I'm joking, Carnley. If you listened to my program you'd know I saw combat in Afghanistan."

"Oh yeah, sorry, I forgot in the hurry."

By the time we reached the Great Hall, it was quiet and we saw the Chief walking up the hill from the trees that are toward the entrance, club in hand, with a fierce face. Aunt Ilana emerged from some bushes next to the Great Hall and she had my shotgun.

The Chief sat down on a retaining wall along the sidewalk and said, "I snuck behind them."

"Monsters?" I said.

"No. Human beings with weapons. Two raiders." He motioned to my carbine in Barron's hands. "You heard them. I think they were scouts."

Ms. Haversham had by then come out of hiding inside the Great Hall and joined us. "Anyone hurt? Will they be bringing others?" she said anxiously, but then, "Mr. Barron, put that rifle away! Ms. Barefoot, you too? What is this, a militia? We don't allow them on campus. I don't approve of firearms. Carnley, is that a gun?"

"Miss Haversham," I said. "I don't think you should worry about guns or about invading scouts, because I believe Mr. Chief Mankiller knocked them guys on the head with his funny war club."

~

That was Saturday. More storms was on the way, and they continued off and on with added intensity overnight, peaking Sunday morning with a tornado which ripped by the edge of campus and tore the roof off the Great Hall. Everyone had been hiding in the basement, and

the place was a grubby, smelly mess and we were all hungry, if not thirsty. We did have water, more than we liked. Meanwhile, between the tumultuous tempests I listened to outside broadcasts about battles everywhere in the region. I never did raise Earl again. I hoped the baby was okay.

Mr. Barron and Aunt Ilana got cozy—they huddled in a corner together much of the daytime and sort of slept in their sleeping bags snugged up to each other… like everyone else did all around, there being no floor space and no privacy. I heard her tell him that she was adopted from a foster home, which I knew already.

So, by Monday morning we had peace from the sky and we begun to hope the storms were done and they were. The battles and riots ended, too.

We spent the week taking care of people and cleaning up the campus. The flooded creek shrunk to normal and the main roads out of the damaged area of the state got cleared, so by Thursday we ran guests out to the Asheville airport. Most drove themselves away as soon as they could. Everything was a mess out there. Burned buildings. Wrecked cars. Drowned people.

On Saturday afternoon, we (Aunt, Mr. Mankiller, Mr. Barron, and me) drove to Franklin to a professional radio studio to do Mr. Barron's program live, his once-a-week program called Strange Days Radio. I told him we could broadcast from Swan Mountain Retreat on my ham rig and have it relayed to FM, but he said he needed more credibility than that would afford. The guests each had a piece to contribute to the program—I just sat in the engineer's booth wearing headphones—and we took some interesting calls from locals, but Mr. Mankiller's words were most shocking of all, to me, anyway.

Aunt Ilana's indeed were shocking, but not surprising for someone who knows her, if that makes sense.

I got the transcript later on and this is what they said in the interview, the important parts. I'm skipping the intro and the parts I've already told about—all the weird stuff that had happened before.

MR. BARRON: Mr. Mankiller, George. When we first met, you offered me this carved turtle as a thank you gift. The wood is hemlock. On its back rests a lovely dryad. What's the significance of the turtle in Cherokee tradition?

MR. MANKILLER: In the beginning, the world was covered by water, and the Creator tended the Tree of Life in Heaven. He made a daughter for himself to keep him company, and then he created a man for her. The woman talked a lot and liked to play. She got rambunctious and fell through a hole at the base of the tree. She fell and fell. The Creator asked all the creatures for a volunteer to catch her and none

stepped forward, none but the turtle. The birds and other creatures brought mud from the sea bottom and piled it on the turtle's back because it was not wide enough for her, and so he caught and saved her. The turtle represents the Earth, the Turtle Island.

MR. BARRON: Dryads, or by the Cherokee name, Standing People. What are they? Their relationship to the trees.

AUNT: Some believe that Standing People are spirits of trees and this is true, but not entirely true. Standing People spirits are separate beings that are associated with trees, living in symbiosis with them. They and the trees live in dependency with one another. When a tree dies, a Standing Person may die. That is, slowly fade into nonexistence—she blows away like dry leaves, or she may connect with another tree. The tree spirits have the ability, not always within their control, to alter their appearances, even taking on a human form, but they must always be in relationship with their tree species, as for example, by simply consuming the hemlock's inner bark.

MR. MANKILLER: [clears throat] Oh, my word. I never knew the meaning of the engravings on the Judaculla rock—not until now, until Miss Barefoot explained. The Standing People turn into monsters when they are separated from their trees, or when the trees die and no others are near, or when they consume human chemicals, or garbage.

AUNT: You had to learn this for yourselves.

MR. BARRON: Well, um… I don't know what to say. So, do humans become monsters, too? Is this the explanation for the violence?

MR. MANKILLER: I have felt the loss of the trees. It's why I got dirty drunk the other day. There's a spiritual connection between us and the natural world. Moral decline results in environment degradation when we lose touch with the natural world. Our spiritual poverty pollutes nature, nature then abandons us and we become poorer. It spirals down and down.

Chief Mankiller gathered himself and spoke the next words as a tuneless chant: "There is no truth or mercy or knowledge of God in the land. By swearing and lying, killing and stealing and committing adultery, they break all restraint, with bloodshed upon bloodshed. Therefore the land will mourn; and everyone who dwells there will waste away with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air; even the fish of the sea will be taken away."

MR. BARRON: Is that a Cherokee prophecy?

MR. MANKILLER: It's from the Bible. You know, I never said that the feminine figure on the back of my carved turtle is a hemlock spirit. She's not a Standing Person at all. She's human. She represents the human race that fell from the tree of life.

Awkward silence followed.

The engineer in the booth beside me leaned forward into his microphone. “Somebody say something. We are live. I’m breaking in four, three, two—”

MR. BARRON: Um, you say it’s an environmental issue. It’s connected. What, what can we do? Will these insane incidents continue or spread elsewhere? What can we do to prevent them in the future?

AUNT: There’s work in progress to preserve the eastern and Carolina hemlocks from extinction. Volunteers collect seeds and grow them in conservation banks. There’s one in Chile, South America, others in North Carolina. Some people tell of a giant hemlock hidden away in the forest. She’s unaffected by the woolly adelgid. She has developed a natural toxin that makes her unpalatable to the little beasts. If we could collect seeds from her and propagate them, her resistance would pass on to her offspring and thus, in time, we could repopulate.

MR. BARRON: What a fascinating surprise. Our guest is not only expert on Cherokee culture and history, but she’s a botanist as well.

AUNT: Another idea is to harvest the dead giants before the lumber decays. You’d have to create a non-profit organization to donate the proceeds to the hemlock conservation bank and to the nursery program of growing resistant trees. The organization would educate the public about the tragic loss of our trees, one as significant as the loss of the American Chestnut. The lumber should be stockpiled because with so many dead, it will take a century for new trees to be replenished. Hemlock lumber from eastern trees will be a rarity, and when people buy it, like in Mr. Mankiller’s superb carving work, they’ll know they’re contributing to the tree’s preservation.

MR. MANKILLER: This is all fine, but what can we do now? The storms and monsters will return again, and soon. There will be more collapses. They’ll spread throughout the whole Turtle Island.

AUNT: The momentary suspension of human conscience was triggered by the rage of what you call monsters, the Tsuga spirits. If they could be moved, moved to where hemlocks are healthy, it would leave our region spiritually depleted, but it might prevent violent outbreaks.

MR. BARRON: Where would that region be?

AUNT: The Pacific Northwest. It’s a different species there, but still in the genus Tsuga. Some Standing People could go to Japan, too.

MR. BARRON: And how does one transport tree spirits? By train or airplane? Would they ride in cargo, or would they insist on first class?

From here on the transcript doesn’t catch the drama, so I drop it entirely. Mr. Barron had made his last comment with that rude skepticism which so annoys, and he also wore a sarcastic smirk on his face. I had warned him. He had not treated Aunt’s idea with respect, something I

learned to do long ago—after all, she lets me drive her pickup truck.

And this is where things got truly shocking. First, the humidity jumped and my bones begun to ache. I felt oppressed, like when a storm nears. The glass between us and the studio steamed over, so it was hard to see, but it seemed like I was looking into a greenhouse stuffed with plants. I heard a deep rumble from outside the building. I jumped up and peered through the glass. There was Aunt Ilana… and I'll say it plainly… she was fading in and out between her self, a tree spirit in a silky shaggy gown, a conifer tree, and the white-eyed monster.

Holy Moley!

Seeing how no one had been talking sense during this event—I heard a loud inhuman whisper mixed with my aunt singing—the unfazed engineer cut to a commercial break.

We ran around to the studio, and when we opened the door, a musty smell both rank and fresh hit us. Maybe of decaying leaves and sweat, a mix of that and the perfume of Clammy Azaleas. Mr. Barron, Aunt, and Mr. Mankiller was sitting around the table as they had been. Mr. Mankiller looked shocked, but wise. Aunt appeared vibrant and seductive. Mr. Barron looked bewildered, but happy. Mostly happy. In fact, he and Aunt was holding hands until I said, "What's going on here?"

The engineer said, "Whatever just happened, we're going back on air. Callers are waiting. Compose yourselves." He ran back to his booth. "In three, two, one…"

"Good evening, folks," Mr. Barron said, "Strange Days Radio is back." (He's a professional.) "We've been talking about moving hemlock dryads from western North Carolina to the Pacific Northwest. Ms. Ilana Barefoot and Mr. George Mankiller are our guests tonight. Ms. Barefoot has an idea she told me about during our break."

"The wind, Jonathan," she said. "The prevailing winds, of course. We will sail from west to east around our planet, the Turtle Island, in vessels made of hemlock wood."

"Sailing ships on the ocean?"

"No, my dear sir, helium windships in the air. What else could they be? Mr. Mankiller, will you carve their decorations for us?"

He saluted. "It would be my pleasure."

Okay. So, I thought, that solved the mysteries of my Aunt Ilana and the monsters. There *was* always something eccentric about her and now I knew why. I suppose I'll be collecting her tiny, winged hemlock seeds deep in the mountains. And they'll become… my what?

Cousins?

END

The Tragedy of Bernie the Homeless

After his mother chased him away, Bernie enjoyed a simple life off the grid, but acorns, berries, and grubs grew boring and harder to find, and they didn't always suit his digestion. Then winter struck and froze his butt. Also, he thought he'd eventually find company in the wild, but others who shared his freegan, opportunivore ways shunned him. Ran from him, in fact. Were afraid and thought him loony.

So, Bernie finally decided to quit living in the forest.

Toward the end of the following fall, rather than endure another hungry, lonely winter, he moved into town, the edge of town. He hid during the day in a dry culvert and worked the dumpsters and garbage cans at night. This wasn't bad, in comparison to the forest. The food—including rich proteins of ripened meat and concentrated carbohydrates of aged bread—made him delirious. They were high-powered drugs commanding fervent devotion and risk-taking.

One evening long after sundown, he discovered a bag of black-oil sunflower seeds under a deck. Just what he needed to build up body weight. An outdoor light bulb flashed on and Bernie grabbed the heavy bag and dragged it to a dark band of trees. He ripped a hole out and licked up a mouthful of seeds.

"Is it a bear, dear?" a woman's voice from the house asked.

"I can't be sure," a man answered.

A blinding corona moved closer. Damned human wasn't afraid, and it scared Bernie. He abandoned the birdseed, rushed away quick, and jumped onto a tree trunk. The guy was trotting toward him with a heavy stick, and Bernie shimmied up as fast as he could, barely escaping an arcing swing. Bernie climbed as high as he dared and looked down. When the man shined the flashlight on him, Bernie chomped his teeth and huffed, but the threats weren't convincing. If only he could keep from crapping and peeing, and whining, but his true instincts overwhelmed his intentions.

"That's disgusting. Come down, you crazy idiot," the man said. "I'm not really going to hurt you."

Bernie climbed higher.

"Please yourself, you fool. But you'd better be gone by morning."

"Shouldn't we bring the birdfeed into the basement?" the woman asked.

Bernie waited a solid hour before he dared to slide down the tree. He slunk back to his culvert, resolved to be more cautious. Someplace in his fuzzy brain, Bernie felt how unfair it was when human pressures compromised the natural habitat.

~

By the next night, Bernie's stomach growled and groaned, overwhelming his resolution to be more careful. He padded along his regular trails until he entered a new territory, determined to raid the first food resource he unearthed. Suddenly, he caught a soothing, buttery aroma that awoke in him a primal craving. He felt the exact places it touched his olfactory cells. He knew the precise neural regions within his cranium that the sense affected, and it set his mouth watering, saliva dripping down his chin. He seemed to float toward the origin of the fragrance and soon arrived at a tall white box within a fenced enclosure, a box amid clusters of battered, duct-taped boxes.

Ahhh, of course. Beehives.

Bernie sat down for a moment. He had to figure this out, because honeybees sting. Honeybees sting bears. Stings hurt. But bears eat honey, and bears eat bee brood because it's high in fat and protein. There's a house nearby. Fence. Danger. But bee brood sweetened with honey, seasoned by pollen, along with piney scents of propolis. Hunger. Bears don't mind bee stings so much. They have thick black fur. It's worth it.

So, he waded through the fence, which scratched and tingled, a disagreeable burning tingle that made his mind vibrate. Standing on his hind legs, he shoved a beehive. It didn't move. He shoved harder and started it rocking. When it toppled and busted with a crunch, bees swarmed out and stung him everywhere they found flesh. Bernie screamed and rolled on the ground, but he craved the brood, so he dug into the comb where he thought brood might be. Bees even stung him inside his mouth, but he kept eating. It tasted heavenly and he pushed the pain back somehow.

Until a metallic clacking and another ominous light warned him.

Bernie felt the buckshot at the same instant he heard the explosion. He roared and swatted where the lead pellets pierced his neck. He tore through the fence and ran blindly, his eyes swelling shut. Then he charged into a thicket and slammed into a tree trunk, hitting it head-on and collapsing onto the ground.

As his ember of consciousness chilled and faded, an inner voice whispered, "It's unfair. Always unfair."

~

A beam of light worked right and left until it illuminated the blood trail. It proceeded until the glistening red dribbles stopped, and then the light worked right and left again until it arrived where Bernie lay in a heap. The light froze on his face.

"Oh my Lord," the beekeeper said and sank to his knees.

When paramedics arrived, they found Bernie dead from loss of

blood and anaphylactic shock. They grimaced at his matted hair, skin blackened with ground-in dirt, and a stench like that of rotted skunk. The dark rags clinging to his starved frame were stiff with grease.

"You're in trouble, sir," the deputy sheriff said to the beekeeper. "You've got a right to defend your life and property, but you have no business firing a gun at night toward an unidentified target."

The beekeeper pleaded through eyes tearful from remorse. "Bears are destroying my bees. They attack every night, and electric fences aren't reliable. I can't make my living anymore."

"Tell the magistrate."

"But, I thought for sure he was a bear."

"No doubt you did," the deputy said, fastening handcuffs on the beekeeper. "Looks like Bernie Wells believed he was a bear, too."

END

Genius

Brad heaved what might be a truncated stainless steel water heater onto his table under the ancient live oaks.

"Still peddling your miraculous apparatus?" Marquis said and plucked a dog-eared brochure from Brad's stack. "Looks dubious, old man. Hmm… Lead lining and rechargeable battery."

"If I was a person of color like yourself…"

"Bullscat. Everybody got a color."

Cars swished by on the road. Breezy. Hot. Seagulls gliding overhead. Marquis stood behind his van, handing out bags of fresh shrimp and ice, taking in cash, improvising rhymes. Brad sagged in a chair at his tailgate while massaging the small of his back.

A Cadillac squeezed between the road and the salesmen, the driver one of those southern ladies who never sweats, but only glows. She left the engine running. "Two pounds of jumbos, please." The Cadillac's air conditioner kicked into high gear. "What are *you* selling?" she asked Brad.

"I invented… Um… It converts matter to energy, ma'am."

"What's it for?"

Marquis grinned like he knew what was coming.

"It'll power your house for pennies a month. I mean, using gravel from your driveway."

"Our driveway is paved."

Brad sighed.

"We *do* need backup for hurricane season."

"Eighty-nine hundred dollars," Marquis said.

The lady lit up, impressed.

"What? He's lying," Brad said, pink turning maroon. "I'm asking five hundred."

"Decent price," she said, diminished considerably.

"Want a demonstration?" Brad asked, but the woman and her jumbos were moving toward the Cadillac. They rolled away.

"Her manner of saying 'hot dang scam,'" Marquis said. "Have you tried selling electricity to the utility company, genius?"

"Nobody believes me. I wrote to research universities. A few sent me form letters. It was ten years before I created a single watt. Another ten before the generator stopped overheating. Then Dad died, my wife left, my son moved away, and our metal scrap business slid downhill. The creditors got mean and my property taxes

are delinquent. Hey, I'll give *you* a demonstration."

Marquis laughed. "No, no, please."

Brad looked down the road. "I don't care anymore."

Shadows crept underfoot as the sun arced over the trees. Trailing beards of Spanish moss swayed leeward. Shrimp customers came and went. Sold out, Marquis dumped the remaining ice and stowed his coolers.

"Here's a pound I saved for you. Take it, free."

"I don't need anything."

"Don't be a jackass. Take it."

"If you insist. Thanks. It means a lot."

Marquis began lifting his folding table when a leg dropped off and thumped to the ground.

"Cacapoo!"

Brad grabbed the broken leg, his face twitching like he was recalculating his entire life. "Okay. Bring it to my junkyard and I'll weld it."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know." Marquis frowned at the stainless steel tub. "But you *can* weld."

Brad packed up and Marquis followed in his van along a languid river. Auction notices and No Trespassing signs glared from the high fence surrounding the junkyard. Brad unlocked the gate and beckoned Marquis in. They entered a building of weathered wood, rusted sheeting, and slimed windows. Brad emitted a curse in the dim light. Marquis flopped his hand along the wall. Found a switch, but nothing happened.

"One second," Brad said. Eyes adjusted, he selected a banana peel and a candy wrapper. Unscrewed a hatch in another tub, dropped in the garbage, tightened the hatch, and mashed a button. The machine hissed and began to purr, at which time blinding lights popped on everywhere and speakers blasted mind-splitting psychedelic rock. Brad rushed outside, dragged in the table, tossed it onto a workbench, and hooked up a clamp. He jerked on leather gloves, pulled a helmet over his head, snatched up another clamp with a welding rod attached.

"Don't look!" he shouted and slammed the face shield down.

The walls flashed like a baby sun was born into Brad's hands. Crackling and humming. Metallic smoke rising. Fingers jammed in his ears, mouth open, Marquis marveled at the pulsing shadows.

"Hey, breaker box! Fan! Turn it on!" Brad jabbed a finger toward a corner.

The giant exhaust fan's thunder overwhelmed all other sound.

A long minute later the baby sun went dark. Brad flipped up his shield and made a cutting motion at his neck. "Fan! Stereo!"

The building hushed except for Brad's tapping.

"Wow," Marquis whispered. "Wow." He stared at the generator, then wandered around the shockingly messy room. On a counter sat a full bottle of rum, a headlamp, a bag of pills, and a box stuffed with unopened mail.

"Past due bills," Brad said. "But none for electricity."

Marquis picked up a handful of envelopes. "You got a letter here. A personal letter."

Brad threw down his hammer, grabbed the letter, and dropped into a chair. Opened it and read. He was quiet.

"What?"

"From my son."

"That's good, right?"

"You don't understand. Those pills? If I didn't sell a generator today, I planned to swallow them with the rum. Everything but the generator has failed. I've sacrificed everything else and finally gave up. But when your table broke, I was needed."

Marquis waited.

"Ralphie wants me to live with him."

"Will you?"

Wet-eyed, Brad nodded vigorously. "Judy and my grandkids want to see me." Brad started packing in a whirlwind, Marquis pitching in.

"Listen," Brad said. "The device is patented, and the plans, equations, diagrams, procedures, and manufacturing techniques are in a safe-deposit box in custody of my lawyer. He hasn't been paid, so he won't be cooperative. But here's a notarized document giving it all to you. Read the fine print. Fill in your name. I built two generators and I'm taking one. Here are all your keys."

Marquis was awestruck.

Brad loaded the suitcases into his pickup and jumped in the driver's seat. "God bless!"

Marquis watched Brad roar away. He returned inside and switched off the generator. The room's lights faded. Definitely needed better storage batteries. He felt his way to the door and drove the van out through the entrance. Locked the gates and stood

back. My lucky day, he thought. He owned a miraculous invention, one to revolutionize the energy industry and make him fabulously rich.

Unbelievable.

All of a sudden he felt a horrible fear. Brad had left so fast and looked so relieved. What if the machine is a *curse*? What if he ends up like Brad, wasting his whole life in futility and frustration? What if the only way to escape is to convince another sucker to adopt the cause?

A hot dang scam!

Nah, Marquis thought. Bullscat. Sell shrimp, sell anything.

END

Baptism

The cavern and its water reflection display perfect symmetry.

I look up from this digital image to glare from the hospital window. Mt. Hood, immobile, overwhelms the eastern horizon. My mom on the bed moans from a deepening vacancy—she hasn't eaten for a week, her advance directive enforced against my wishes.

What's below the surface? I'm now immersed in the cavern's pool, an ambient 54 degrees F. But reflection is illusion. Image is merely likeness. With death, do we as images and reflections of the Creator finally ascend into reality?

The small hospital room fills with people.

"Okay," the nurse says. "They're ready to transport your mother to hospice. Will you support her head while we lift her onto the gurney?"

"You don't understand what's going on," I say coldly. *They will kill her by dehydration.*

I'm frozen in place, icy water dripping down.

END

Attack of the Gravid Amazons

Kyle Johnson squinted at his wife silhouetted by the fiery sky and mumbled, “You’re looking staggeringly fecund this morning.”

Emily tossed her hairbrush onto a table, hugged her translucent nightgown closer, and stepped toward the window. “Husband, come see this! It’s from another world.”

Kyle swung into a sitting position on the edge of the hotel bed and massaged his face. “We didn’t come for Singapore’s skyline,” he said in a yawn. His wife’s work delivering babies and his career in architectural acoustics could hardly have driven them apart more, and with the encouragement of Emily’s snotty senior partner, they had agreed to get away and pursue what they both loved: bug watching. Their upcoming expedition in Borneo was the last hope of salvaging their marriage.

“Do you even know what fecund means?” Emily asked pensively.

“Don’t expect me to know fancy definitions unrelated to audible mechanical waves.” Kyle was grumpy because now he suspected fecund (a word he had heard from the smirking elevator operator describing an aphrodisiac fruit called a durian) related to childbirth. Emily wanted children and he absolutely did not.

Oddly, she ignored his crankiness. “You really should see this scene. I’m serious.” She grimaced, eased into a chair, and pressed her hand on her stomach.

Kyle stumbled to the window, his camera ready. Outside, everything manmade appeared as it had the evening before. The giant Singapore Flyer Ferris Wheel, stationary this early in the day. The Marina Bay Sands Hotel and its submarine-cruise-ship-shaped park perched atop three towers. The neon-lit skytowers of the Central Business District still reflected in Marina Bay. All spectacular by human design.

But the upper sky and the bay foreground upstaged all artifice as they blazed plum-purple. And at the horizon behind the angular high-rises lay strata of swirling scarlet. A fat orange and saffron sunball spun in place. Surpassing all, deep red rays drifted down, not from the sun in the east, and not pouring through a rift in towering clouds as such light often does, but descending through a clear atmosphere.

“Wow. It’s exciting,” he said and began snapping pictures.

“They mean danger.” Emily wobbled to her feet, swayed to the bathroom, and retched into the commode.

The gagging, dripping noise of it made Kyle feel queasy, but he moved to where he could see her rinsing her face and asked, “How can

I help you, love?"

~

"Bug calls produce mechanical waves, don't they?" Emily asked later in the morning as she and Kyle strolled along the waterfront of the Marina Promenade under a now ordinary sky. The searing equatorial heat hadn't built up yet, and people were jogging, lounging in beach chairs, and posing for photographs. A boy with a fishing pole cast his line into the water. No babies anywhere to be seen, Emily thought. What a barren place.

She absent-mindedly thumbed the pages of their guidebook, wondering why she had thrown up. The odd rays from the sky disturbed her equilibrium, maybe. When she was 14, she fell from a sugar maple tree while watching ladybugs devour aphids, and vertigo and headaches had afflicted her ever since.

Shading his eyes, her husband halted under a rain tree and peered into its branches. "Boxer Mantis!" Fixing on a particular spot, Kyle raised his binoculars, and then his shoulders slumped. "Dead leaf."

Emily loved Kyle, but his fun-obsessed nature made him disappointing as a lifelong companion. When they met on an Amazon Basin expedition, he was a cute, charming boy, often dragging her by the hand in his enthusiasm. She needed that exuberance then, but after they married, he remained exactly the same. And a perpetual child has no capacity for being a parent. He wouldn't even discuss children. All he ever said was, "You help babies into the world and I'm delighted. But since I'll never, ever change diapers, I'd be a terrible dad."

Emily again pressed her belly. The momentary sickness… She showed every sign of pregnancy, but she should buy a test to be sure. She really hoped it was a false alarm, because if forced to choose between Kyle and a baby, she'd leave him. More immediately, pregnancy would jeopardize their jungle trek, with its dangerous rapids, torrential rains, mud, leeches, stiff climbs up mountain tracks, and rough sleeping in hammocks.

She glanced up from the guidebook and said wistfully, "We should see the toy museum. We'll find plenty of flora and fauna once we reach Kayan Mentarang Park. I'm especially—"

"Why must you control every situation?"

Oh, no, not again. Emily's mind clouded with resentful defensiveness, and she almost tossed back, *It's not every damn situation*, but she checked herself and said instead, "I'm trying to be helpful… we promised we weren't having these conversations. And I won't take calls from patients, and you won't look at concert halls."

He twisted his mouth into a sour expression and looked askance. "Yeah, yeah. I'm sorry."

She closed the guidebook and took his arm. "Whatever you want for our last day in Singapore is fine." She leaned forward, intending to give him a quick peck, but now he was gawking over her shoulder, his pupils dilated. Leering at an Asian babe, Emily thought, now angry and hurt enough to walk away and fly back to North Carolina alone.

She whirled around to see for herself.

It wasn't a babe. It was a *pack* of babes: young, lithe, and muscular, stalking forward along the promenade, what skimpy clothing they were wearing obviously not for modesty. They might be a pageant of mixed martial arts fighters. Their skin was a jade green. Many of their bellies were swollen, and one or two bulged with full-term pregnancies. They each carried complicated luggage on straps slung over their shoulders.

"An exotic dance troupe," Kyle said. "Epic."

"I don't think so…" Emily's fury had dissipated with the bewildering mystery.

Holding tightly onto Kyle's arm, she glanced around the promenade. Scattered columns of smoke and ash rose and dispersed in the humid tropical air. This made no sense. There were decidedly fewer people now than before, and she felt a creeping dread. Then, when she whiffed what might be the savory aroma of a steakhouse mingled with burning hair and trash, she felt full-on horror. She couldn't explain how she knew what was happening. With their luggage—not luggage at all, but laser-like weapons—the green women were ruthlessly incinerating people.

"Let's go," Emily said, forcing back panic.

"What?"

"Hurry. We need to leave." They began a quick march in the general direction of their hotel.

"I don't get it."

A solitary elderly Malay man nearby was pushing a stroller. A green woman aimed her weapon, and a beam of violet light flared. He glowed magenta for an instant and exploded into a cloud of ash and smoke, leaving the stroller intact. Emily flinched, threw her arms up against the heat, then felt Kyle pulling her into a run. Despite the green woman's large tummy, she was faster, moving in front and blocking their way. The woman didn't look *at* them, but like a tiger without any human feeling, she gazed toward them. Emily hugged Kyle close, expecting these to be their last moments.

The green woman tilted her head in a bow, a red braid at the side of her dark hair dangling back and forth. Her countenance seemed to soften. Emily felt a tingle, a spasm deep in her body core.

"Ow!" Kyle shouted and grabbed his backside. Emily wheeled

around. Another green woman swung her weapon away—she had shot him in the butt, but he hadn't vaporized. Kyle lunged at her with bared fists, but she and the other green woman had already begun sprinting away.

All the green women moved away and the smoke cleared. As far as Emily knew, she and Kyle were the only people left alive. She stared into the stroller and said nothing.

"A baby?" Kyle asked, glancing around the promenade. "What's inside?"

"Just cats. Two of them."

~

An hour later back in their hotel room, Kyle's leg muscles quivered with anxiety as he scanned the city with his binoculars. "I don't see any movement. Wait. I hear…" He touched fingertips to the glass. "Helicopters."

His wife was sitting in a chair beside him and watching the ruddy, bushy-tailed cats wrestling on the carpet. They probably were siblings, equally alert to every rustle and twitch, and full of leftover chicken satay.

Kyle had raised no objection when Emily began pushing the orphaned cats away from the promenade. They had meandered through vacant Marina Bay streets until they found an abandoned taxi with the engine still running, the gas tank nearly dry. The hotel was practically empty of guests when they arrived—a few people wandered the lobbies in confusion.

Emily's phone in her hand began chirping like a cricket. The cats' ears turned, and the animals crouched and began creeping towards her. Emily stared blankly.

"Are you answering?" Kyle asked.

"It's Matthew," she said finally.

"Hello Emily, girl," a familiar irritating male voice said. "Your most senior partner here."

Emily remained silent, so the jerk continued. "Emily? I'd pledged not to call you even in an emergency, and I know how important this time is for your marriage."

Kyle felt twinges of jealousy and embarrassment. He wished Emily would keep it all-business with him, Dr. Matthew Spenser. "Matt, you're on speaker," Kyle said brusquely.

"Oh, hello, pal. We've heard about the invasion of Singapore, Emily. The aliens also attacked at Macao, and in Eastern Europe, primarily Austria and Bosnia. We've seen nothing here."

"We saw people killed," Emily said. "It was horrible. The city's a ghost town." She covered her ear with her palm, like when a migraine

was coming on. “They didn’t mean to destroy anyone. They were incinerating litter.”

“What?” Kyle asked. “What are you saying, Emily?”

“I’m just feeling funny.”

Matthew continued without a bump. “I’ve heard from friends within the State Department. The invasion was defeated by the Singapore Defense Forces. They’ve got a substantial number of captured aliens, and some of them are injured. They need doctors, particularly they need OB-GYNs and right away.”

Kyle wagged his head back and forth in disbelief. The jungle and the rebuilding of their relationship awaited them.

“Where do we need to be?” Emily asked.

“The aliens are being held someplace called the Esplanade. It’s the only building big enough that can be made secure.”

Kyle gave her a sardonic grin and said, “The performing arts center. Designed by world-famous architect Fredrick Johnson, my distant relative.”

“We’ll be there in an hour,” she said and disconnected.

“I knew we couldn’t keep our promises.”

“Yeah, and you *hate* it, too,” she said with amiable facetiousness.

“And you *hate* playing doctor.”

“What we hate was driving us apart.”

“But now we get to be apart *together*.” Kyle reached around her waist and pulled her to him.

“With aliens.”

“In Singapore. It’s great.” He planted a kiss on her neck.

Her body abruptly stiffened. “Kyle, this is serious.”

“Unless the aliens carry parasites,” he murmured into her ear, “we won’t see bugs.”

“I mean the invasion. It’s just beginning.”

“Why are you saying this crazy stuff?” he said and released her. His wife was beginning to worry him.

~

They stopped to fill the taxi at a deserted, wide-open fuel station, and without Emily prompting him, her husband ran to a next-door grocery and brought back cat food, kitty litter, and a cardboard box.

Emily was sitting in the back, deftly braiding her hair, the cats snoozing on her lap. “I thought you hated pets.”

Kyle ripped open the kitty litter and poured it into the box. “I don’t like dependency, but we can’t let them poop everywhere and starve.”

The performing arts center featured twin metallic domes, each looking like the back of an aardvark, or an elongated silver golf ball, or the compound eye of a fly. The complex buzzed with scrambling,

urgent activity centered upon the main auditorium. With Kyle and the cat stroller behind her, Emily stopped at one of the propped-open doors. Huddled in pockets throughout the cavernous space, the green women displayed none of the fierceness Emily had seen along the promenade. *They look like frightened children*, she thought.

"It's like a refugee center," Kyle said.

"Excuse me, please." A uniformed medical aid had walked up to them. "Dr. Johnson? An Amazon is beginning to push."

Kyle's face puckered into an expression of disgust and ironic amusement. "Amazon? While you're working, Emily, the cats and I are touring the structure, starting in the balcony."

"I thought you might help me."

"No, really," he said, flushing. "Pregnant green Amazons giving birth are not my type."

"It's fine, Kyle. I'm joking. I love you."

"Love you babe." He kissed her on the cheek, faked a shudder at the auditorium, leaned into the carriage before him and sauntered away.

When Emily arrived at an improvised, screened-off birthing alcove, she found an impending mother-to-be lying flat on a table and panting. A half dozen armed Singapore guards stood inside the space, watching.

"What the—?" Emily said, bristling. "All of you, get out." She put an arm around the mother's shoulders and lifted her. "Where's that medical aide? What do you want?" she said to a soldier, an ethnic Chinese girl who had remained.

"Excuse me, Doctor. I'm a paramedic."

"Then put your gun away. Do we have a Doppler and a blood pressure cuff?"

"I don't know."

"Though I have no idea of their physiology… Fetch some pillows, quick. Find me a mattress."

Between contractions now and with sweat beading on her face, the green woman rested limply. "Everything's well," Emily said to her. The woman seemed to have dozed off. The paramedic rushed in followed by soldiers loaded with seat cushions. They spread them on the floor.

Outside the screen, angry voices were shouting, "Get back. We will shoot!"

Emily helped the green woman down to the bed, and the paramedic propped her up just as the woman arched her back and moaned. Her belly rose up into a rock-hard mound.

"Baby is crowning. Massage the small of mom's back." Emily glanced around the space, spotted a weird bottle—probably belonging

to the alien. The contents smelled like nothing but water, so Emily rinsed her hands and arms. "We've got a baby coming."

More shouting intruded from beyond the screen, which began shaking, and bulged until it collapsed with a startling crash. All the Amazons had gathered in silence to watch the birth. The mother issued an animal grunt, and the baby slipped into Emily's outstretched arms. A boy, and healthy pink. The mother reached out, and Emily gave her the baby still attached by his umbilical cord. The mother held the baby to her breast, and the creature rooted for a moment and began feeding. Tucking a clean white towel around him, Emily nodded to the paramedic who cut the cord.

Three things happened at once. The mother's head flopped to the side, the baby slid into her lap, and the Amazons, all of them, cried out in disharmonious, inarticulate wailing.

"Take the baby," Emily said to the paramedic and checked the mother's vitals.

Emily found her alive in body, but as if her spark of consciousness had been extinguished. The Amazons wandered back to their clusters, some of them with tears creeping down their faces.

The medical aide appeared at last, but only to report, "Dr. Johnson, we tested them. All the Amazons are pregnant. Every one. And we have another birth in progress. Please follow me."

Kyle, still impelling the cat carriage ahead of him, had walked up in the middle of this message. "I was next door talking with a science official about the alien weapons, and I heard the noise. How are you?"

"Kyle, I have to go."

Kyle sighed and said, "I suppose you do."

"What does *that* mean? Wait…" She had an idea. She gently gathered the newborn from the paramedic. "Come here, Kyle, please." Her husband frowned into the sweet baby's face as Emily snuggled up to him. "Could I convince you to want one of these?"

As Kyle drew breath to answer, mystifying deep red sunbeams like those Emily had seen from the hotel window, beams similar to what emanated from the Amazonian weapons, drifted unimpeded down into the concert hall.

~

The space around Kyle morphed into another location altogether. His completed breath seared his lungs, setting him into an excruciating fit of gasping and agonized coughing. He lowered himself to a metallic floor and saw Emily sitting beside him, likewise coughing and holding the sputtering baby. A green someone tapped Kyle's neck, leaving a sandpapery patch. The someone also stuck patches on Emily and the baby. His burning pain soon dissipated, allowing Kyle to take in the

surroundings, a tube-like compartment like a subway car, but wider, four times larger, and full of green women hugging each other and uttering confused croaks and squeals. The floor seemed to be trembling.

Emily touched his arm. "Are you okay?"

He nodded weakly.

"The beams transported us to an alien ship. The Amazon prisoners, too." The baby squirmed and whimpered in her arms. "This child should be fed, and we'll need a diaper change."

Smooth green arms hoisted Kyle and Emily to their feet, and they were guided from the compartment through glass doors into a huge, open pavilion like a domed train terminal, a transparent ceiling showing black sky and bright stars. An Amazon pulled Kyle along, and he glanced back to Emily, who followed unaided. The cats hadn't transported, apparently. Someone at the Esplanade hopefully would take charge of them.

Kyle, his escort, and Emily with the baby passed through teeming crowds of Amazon soldiers and female civilian greeters, and then through vast mall-like spaces and gardens lined with shops and smoky food stalls, all swarming with croaking, wooden-faced women and a few stupefied men and children. Then they moved through long corridors, passageways, and up a never-ending elevator that at last opened into a circular, starlit apartment. There, a bulging Amazon wearing a leather sari and a sparkling gem of extraordinary purple on a gold chain bowed to Emily and motioned for her to take a chair. The escort withdrew.

Kyle and the new Amazon also seated themselves. Her expression was blank and imbecilic. His wife made a wry face as if to convey everything she'd been feeling: confusion, fear, curiosity, nausea—maybe a stress headache. But when she gazed down at the baby and cooed, she looked comforted and happy. Brave girl.

"Well, they haven't killed us, yet," Kyle said. He turned to the Amazon. "Maybe you can explain what you want. Why have you invaded Earth? Can't you talk? Do you understand any human language? How about Singlish? Confirm lah."

The Amazon in the sari watched Kyle with mild interest until another Amazon entered.

"Kyle," Emily whispered. "It's the girl with the red braid. The one we saw on the promenade."

The red-braided Amazon scooted a squeaking chair close to them, sat down, and closed her eyes. Kyle kept glancing at her and away. Emily was scowling. The red-braided woman was amazingly sexy in her leather outfit. It was best to avoid looking in her direction at all, not

only because he felt Emily's eyes on him, but for his own self-composure. He was already feeling powerless and lost. After some minutes, the woman extended a hand toward Emily. As before, the woman never made eye contact. The arm hung there like an offered handshake.

The window cells whirred and closed down to thin slivers from which glaring light streamed in, no longer starlight, but radiation from the sun.

"What should I do?" Emily asked Kyle.

"I don't know. Amazon touch isn't poisonous. See what happens. I mean, who knows, you might be the first person ever to really communicate with these things."

The woman's arm trembled, and when Emily joined her hand to the other's hand, Emily's strength supported them both.

"A flutter in my abdomen. Oh—" She let go. "Kyle, I can't dismiss it any longer. I know why I'm feeling bad. I don't mean to be funny, but I am pregnant."

Until this disclosure, Kyle had borne up to the strangeness, uncertainty, and danger, but the prospect of being a father tipped him over the edge. He jumped from his chair and rampaged around the apartment, flinging his arms and stomping his feet, grunting and cursing. All the while he knew how immature he was acting, and part of him observed that the aliens watched him with more focused interest than usual.

The exertion sent him into spasms of coughing. He calmed himself until the irritation subsided, and he flopped back into his chair, quietly saying, "Sorry, sorry. I just had to explode. I knew you'd get pregnant eventually. Fecund."

"So, you're fine with it?"

"What's the alternative?"

She squeezed his arm. "Kyle, there's more."

"Twins? Oh, cool."

"Our baby. She's why we're alive. It's why the aliens didn't kill us on the promenade."

He cast a fearful gaze at the woman with the red braid and then back to Emily.

Emily looked like she did when she had received the news about passing her OB-GYN boards, when he had proposed to her, during their wedding, when he had agreed to the entomological expedition to Malaysia. She was elated.

"So the aliens don't kill pregnant women?" he asked.

"They've been communicating to me through our baby all this time. It explains everything. Only their pre-natal form is sentient. Imag-

ine. It's so weird. And there's so much more."

~

When she had taken the Amazon's hand, Emily felt as if a feature film had been loaded into her brain. She saw an incredibly beautiful brown, cream, and blue world becoming polluted by volcanic gases inexorably, imperceptibly like a sea becomes salty. She watched the people send scout vessels to Earth and other nearby worlds millennia ago—the scouts who came to Earth never returned. Then she observed the centuries-long project of building massive ships and the preparation for evacuating their planet. When they launched, some stayed behind, refusing to adopt the new technology.

Kyle was watching her with apprehension. *Poor man. The Amazons regard him as my pet, or rather our baby's pet*, *kept alive as a sperm bank*. Feminism in extreme, she thought, except women are only hosts, useful as incubators and bearers of mammary glands—the food sources for future incubators.

"They're called Scythians," she said to Kyle. "Only pregnant females are active. The moment the fertilization process is complete, their embryos are conscious, and as they develop during pregnancy, they manipulate their vegetative host mothers' bodies and telepathically assimilate their race's knowledge and skills. Their higher brain functions end soon after birth."

"The women act like they're puppets," Kyle said.

"Birth is death for them. The pre-born child of this Amazon is named… It's Aegea," she said, motioning toward the woman with the red braid.

Back doors to the apartment slid open, and two alert Amazons with flat tummies, who must be newly pregnant, pulled in a cart laden with stacks of clear polymer cases. The floor under the deep red cushion of air beneath the cart creaked.

The baby began crying in earnest. Emily stood up just as the escorts stepped outside and led another Amazon in by a leash, a mindless sleepwalker. She looked to be no more than 16 years old, but her swollen breasts leaked milk that soaked her garment. The escorts guided her to a couch and settled her, undoing a snap to expose one breast, and then an escort gathered the baby from Emily, arranged the nursemaid's arms, and placed the baby into position. The baby grunted in a tiny greedy voice and rooted until his mouth found the nipple.

"The… nursemaid is producing… colostrums," the Amazon in the leather sari said with a strange accent, her voice resonating with harmonious overtones. She moved to the cart and with a sweep of her arms pantomimed giving it to Emily. "We regret killing your peoples. Please accept this mineral element as compensation. The element is called…

the element doesn't exist in your solar system. It's not radioactive. It's natural and the basis of our technology."

Kyle opened one of the cases and lifted a clear, walnut-sized purple crystal, one resembling the gem that the woman in the sari was wearing, except the facets of his specimen were sharp, and its multiple points protruded like blades of minuscule knives. "Stunning," Kyle said. "How did you learn our language?"

"From our unborn baby through me," Emily answered. "Better let me talk, Kyle."

He rolled his head around as if to say, "Whatever."

The woman in the sari had begun speaking over Kyle and Emily's last remarks. "We were unaware that born peoples in your world are fully alive. The bodies of *our* borns are utilitarian. We preserve the strongest males as breeders and employ artificial insemination. The unneeded borns, we cannibalize, or recycle into base components, such as water and energy. You call it… annihilation. We… forgive us. We thought you were too stupid to clean your own world, so we took it upon ourselves to remove the unwanted pollutions that waste resources. We began in the highest concentrations of pollution."

"She means the places in the world with high populations and low birthrates," Emily said to Kyle. "Like Singapore."

The green woman in the red braid now spoke for the first time. "We thought you'd be glad, and you shocked us when you resisted, so we suspended our settlements. We picked Emily Johnson and you, her embryo, as your planet's representatives because you were kind. You helped the passing of one of our persons, adopting our beloved departed." Here she nodded toward the nursing baby. "His name was Herros."

"Herros?" Emily asked.

"Meaning land, or soil. You also keep a full-grown pet." The red-braided woman gestured toward Kyle. "We respect our people's decisions even if they expend extra resources. We tagged him so he'd be safe. I presume he's a good breeder?"

Kyle rubbed his butt where he had been shot.

"Oh, he's a terrific breeder," Emily said. "We'd like to go back now, Aegea. Back to where you found us."

"I believe it's important for you to understand that the body pronouncing these words is not conscious. We'll presently return to the surface, and will you talk with your leaders about us moving onto your world?"

~

With hand signs punctuating supposedly extrasensory communication to subordinates, Aegea appeared to direct the preparation for Kyle

and Emily's departure. The baby's crying forced them to pause in a corridor so Emily could change his first diaper, one filled with black tarry crap. Kyle glanced at the sticky mess, felt deathly faint, covered his nose, and steadied himself against the wall. An escort tossed him a bag of extra diapers.

"We move warriors and other lower castes en masse by means of the low-frequency waves," Aegea said. "For you, we'll employ a glider."

Accompanied by the escorts bringing the mineral cases, she led the party to a launching bay as huge as a stadium, and then onboard one of the many vessels, each with delicate cerulean blue wings of immense breadth and length. Inside their glider, a transparent wall separated the flight deck from the passenger compartment.

An Amazon sat before the instrument panels in the spacious pilot's cabin. Kyle, Emily, and Aegea settled into the lounge-like passenger section that was lined with bulging bubble windows. Kyle and Emily with baby Herros slipped into a booth. Aegea took a seat by herself. The two escorts placed the nursemaid on the hard floor, and then took positions before other instrument consoles.

There was a wait, perhaps of an hour, for the parent ship to orbit into position, as Aegea explained.

Once the glider launched, Kyle saw the Earth turning below, a shining, living jewel, and all around him hundreds of ships. The astounding perspective, so far above the environment of safe, human habitation, rather than increasing his fear, gave him a feeling of resignation and calm.

"How many of you are there?" Kyle asked.

Aegea stared at him like he might be a talking fencepost and looked to Emily to interpret.

"How many of you are there?" she repeated.

"We are 259 millions. Other ships are orbiting on the opposite side of your planet. Many haven't arrived."

"Earth is already crowded in many places," Emily said. "Not everyone on our planet will want you to live here. Some will fight. You should know… we have nuclear weapons."

Aegea unexpectedly giggled. "Our sunbeams can recycle the organic population of a whole city instantaneously. Those you defeated were not our warriors, but sanitation workers. Even this tiny vessel is armed." Here she glanced toward an escort at a console. "But we're not mass murderers. We'll settle in uninhabited environs. The oceans, or on ice, or in desert. But we are disturbed by hints in your cultures."

"You mean, our wars? Our savage nature?"

Aegea sang a note deep in her throat. "We have our own intra-

species conflicts, but how do you sustain your varied populations with unnatural, low birth rates? You are Earth's ambassador, and we'll tell you our decision soon."

"So, we're keeping baby Herros and the nursemaid, right?" Kyle said.

Aegea stared at him again. "We aren't accustomed to conversant pets. Put the creatures to sleep if you wish. Or recycle them. Their hides make comfortable garments."

"You skin them?" Emily cringed and pressed her free hand over her ear, a sign of an impending migraine. She unclipped her barrette and began working the braids out of her hair.

"These creatures are superfluous."

"Kyle, we have to keep them."

"Yeah, we've decided. Those crystals will be worth something. We should be able to afford the added expense."

"It's surprising that you're horrified at our way of life," Aegea said.

"I'm wondering if you provide your unwanted newborn children with…" Kyle began, but Aegea turned away and walked to a console. "Anything," he muttered to himself.

When Kyle flew, he always reserved a window seat and spent hours gazing at the passing sky and earth below. The field of view from the glider's windows exceeded that from a jet airplane by several magnitudes. The glider's four wings resembled a dragonfly's, broad as well as long, but instead of two pairs joined at the shoulder, the pairs were placed at the ends of the vessel. They tilted and twisted independently, responsive to every subtle maneuver. Kyle heard no engines nor felt any vibration.

He snuggled up to Emily, whose head was bobbing, her eyes half closed. "I have names picked for our baby," he said.

"It's a girl," she said groggily.

"How do you know?"

"I just do. I picked a name, too."

"Oh." Ordinarily, Kyle would have argued over whose name was better and who'd have the deciding vote, but this time his wife's take-charge attitude just hurt him. Why didn't she ask him what name he wanted? He drew away.

Emily must have sensed his thought. "What's the girl's name you picked?"

"Meliss."

"I like it. Honeybee. Never mind what I was thinking."

Kyle gazed from the window, feeling for the first time in a long while the support Emily had given him when they first married. In spite

of the spectacular views, he grew relaxed and drowsy. The glider sailed down and down in spiraling circles until two ugly, grey, misshapen moths—no, fighter jets—reared up beside them.

His soothing meditation disturbed, he left his seat and wandered through the cabin, watching from different windows. Actually, there were three more fighters out there bristling with weaponry.

"What do they want?" Aegea asked Kyle.

"Our planet to be safe."

"We have no way to contact them," Aegea said. "They'll have to be patient. Will they fire?"

"They're probably accompanying us to the airport."

"Why should we go to an airport?"

Emily checked baby Herros (who was dozing next to the inert nursemaid), took out her phone and brushed back her hair with one hand. "I've got reception. I'm calling Matthew."

Kyle felt the usual twinge of jealousy.

As the glider slipped lower and the air thickened, its descent slowed to the rate of a falling leaf; the fighters veered away, unable to fly at this low speed. Unlike on an airplane, the bumps and drops of the glider were gentle, as on an undulating sea. A grove of giant green and orange golf-tee shaped structures appeared below, each one the height of an electricity-generating windmill and made of iron tracery covered in flowering plants.

"Are we on Earth?" Emily asked, siding up to him.

"There's the Esplanade."

"Emily, thank Heavens you're alive!"

Emily had Matt on speaker again, and it dawned on Kyle that she probably did this to keep Matt at arm's length, to share what he said with her husband.

She scooted back into their booth. "Matthew, no time for chit-chat. The situation is tense. Kyle and I are with the Amazon diplomat now. They've selected us as a go-between for them and Earth. We need to reach the military commanders in Singapore."

"Okay," he said, and gave her a northern Virginia number. "Ask for Vance. He's at the State Department."

Vance in turn gave her a number whose owner gave her another number. Within minutes, she had Brigadier General Min on the line, with others up the chain of command connected to the call in-conference.

"One second, gentlemen," she said, her whole body fidgeting, she seemingly involved in an internal debate. Then, to Kyle's astonishment, she offered him the phone. "This is your job, husband, pal."

Kyle hesitated, moved by the respect his wife was showing him.

He knew she had been struggling with releasing control. She must have considered how he'd been objectified by the Amazons, and wanted him to know she trusted him.

"General Min, this is Kyle Johnson. My pregnant wife and I are inside the Amazon vessel near the Esplanade, whatever happens don't—"

"I know who you are. I've been told you provided a science officer with insights that helped us assemble shielding against the death rays. Mr. Johnson, tell the aliens to surrender, or they will be destroyed."

Kyle needed to think, but nothing came to him. The situation was impossible. He leaned into the bubble of the window. The glider was dropping toward a wide, paved strip near the water—probably a boulevard. Stalling, hoping for a flash of genius, he resumed a seat next to Emily, who had taken up the baby, and put his arm around her shoulder. Even the landing was of a leaf, alighting with barely a rustle. Kyle wondered how, with such low energy, it could ascend back into space. Outside the window, the glider was being surrounded by tanks, armored vehicles, and an artillery piece.

"Mr. Johnson?"

The Amazons did not seem concerned. The pilot entered the passenger section and took the place of one of the escorts at a console. The freed escort pulled down a screen and studied it. Aegea was watching over her shoulder.

"Are you there, Mr. Johnson?"

The answer was obvious and elementary. "Please don't fire on the vessel, sir. Your aggression will only aggravate them."

"We're giving them four minutes to surrender. We're not allowing any more people to be vaporized. Do you know how many they murdered? At least 128,430. Men, women, and children."

Kyle was appalled by the number, but he forced himself to focus on his task. "Take no action, sir. Please, just let us arrange a meeting."

"There's no talking in these present conditions. We have infrared and know six total beings are on board. All of you leave the vessel. Time is wasting, Mr. Johnson. We will destroy the vessel."

"Eleven persons on board," Emily said under her breath.

"Wait, sir," Kyle pleaded, but the general had already disconnected the call.

Aegea, the pilot, and an escort had drawn into a circle, touching fingertips. Aegea broke away and stepped to Emily and Kyle. She was shaking, her face contorted by naked anger and disgust.

"You are evil," she said, spitting out the words. "You savages are pure evil. I hold you in contempt. We should annihilate you all."

"What are you saying?" Emily put her hand on Aegea's arm, but the alien leaped away backwards, glaring with ferocity.

"We connected to your world-wide info system. Your race may not possess full sentience when your lives initiate, but all of you have the active potential, which is a form of sentience. You refuse to see the continuity of every person's life. I despise you. You're murderous, bloodthirsty barbarians. You don't deserve to exist. Your planet is cursed. Get off my ship. Take your borns and get out. We're leaving!"

Emily began shaking at this frenzied outburst. "I know what you're talking about, but what about you? Do your newborns communicate?" she cried out. "Do they?"

As if to emphasize Emily's accusation, baby Herros jerked awake and began screaming.

The door to the outside was opening. The escorts dragged the nursemaid through and dumped her on the pavement. The pilot hustled into the cockpit and began tweaking instruments, which set the wings of the vessel pulsing up and down. The escorts dashed inside, grabbed Emily, and began pushing her and Herros out the door. Kyle shoved the women away, bellowing, "Back off, bitches," and supported Emily down the steps, which began retracting before they touched the ground. The door slammed inward, sealed with a hiss, and as the wings lifted and dropped in unison, the vessel sprang into the air, seemingly buoyed from below by red beams.

"Move," he said to Emily and lifted the nursemaid. As a clump, they shuffled away from the craft while the red light grew in intensity and oozed in every direction like a melting marshmallow. The wings cycled once more, and the vessel rose higher and caught an updraft of air. At that moment, the wings blurred into invisibility. A boom and a whistling roar. Kyle glanced up to glimpse a missile streaking from the military cavalcade. "Get down!" he shouted, and they fell into a heap, with Kyle trying to cover the others with his body. The missile exploded, sending the vessel careening sideways and pounding Kyle and the others with a crushing pressure wave.

When Kyle looked up, the vessel seemed undamaged and had resumed its climb, but the explosion had rebounded, shrieking straight back to the artillery piece and blowing it into flying jagged fragments of smoking metal. Emily screamed once and was crying beside him. Violet sunbeams emanated from the vessel and even from the sky above and glowed around them. Kyle heard no unusual sounds, but from the direction of the encircling armaments, grey steam, black smoke, and ash ascended, like from the grand finale of a fireworks show. The textured columns, still holding vague shapes of people, flowed eastward.

"I'm sure every soldier is destroyed," Kyle said. "And maybe every living person in the city but us." Emily was panting in a speech-

less stupor. He tried to hold her, but she fended him off, so he gathered the stunned, whimpering baby into his arms.

~ ~ ~

Herros swept the long-handled net, lost his footing, and surfed down the turf bank into a thicket of violet asters, flowers lively with orange and black monarch butterflies. Laughing, Emily lurched forward to keep from falling backward in her folding camp chair.

"Good going, brother," Meliss said. "You caught it! Here, hand me the net." Despite her words, Meliss did not move to seize the net. "Ummm, sorry Herros, I don't need to be your supervisor."

Emily's laugh this time was to herself. She surely had passed some of her alpha genes to her daughter.

Herros climbed the bank as he held the net aloft. Meliss reached into the net and gently enveloped the struggling insect into her cupped hands. She maneuvered so as to pinch the front edges of its wings together. "Ready."

Her brother pressed a white dot under the hind wing.

Meliss placed the butterfly on her open palm, and the butterfly flapped away as if the delay had only made it more determined to reach its southward destination.

"What's the count now, Dad?" Herros called to Kyle who with daughters Asmara and Slanda were pacing up and down on the sidewalk, their faces turned toward the sky.

"467 in just over an hour."

"Amazing. We've tagged 34."

The edge of a mountainous cumulous cloud passed before the sun, and the passably warm October air promptly turned chilly even for this elevation in the southern Appalachians. Emily levered up to her feet, took a fleece blanket, and spread it over the shoulders of the young woman sitting in the chair beside hers. The woman was stroking the ruddy fur of an adolescent cat perched primly in her lap.

"Is that better, Camilla?" Emily asked.

Camilla pointed to the western sky where dark silhouettes of monarchs, alone and in lines, were gliding south on the thermals. Sunrays filtered down from the edges of the cloud blocking the sun, the rays formed of nearly parallel bars of shadow and light. *Natural rays*, Emily thought, and as they often did, reminding her of the cataclysmic day in Singapore 17 years ago.

But why were the memories so strong today?

As they had learned, only a few of the soldiers near the Esplanade had been killed in the final skirmish. Kyle's idea of layering acoustic insulating panels as shielding had saved many lives. After the shock and days of recuperation, she and Kyle canceled their entomology sa-

fari and returned home to North Carolina. The guide company didn't mind. As far as their people knew, Kyle and Emily had saved the whole world.

She had thought Herros' alertness and evident intelligence as a newborn would fade away, but it didn't. Doctors and researchers poked, prodded, tested, and observed, but by all evidences, he developed as a normal boy, with a normal human color, if somewhat olive. Camilla, the nursemaid, lost much of her green, and in time became bathroom-trained and learned to feed herself.

What might it be about Earth that allowed Herros to thrive and gave Camilla a sort of independent life? With deep affection, Emily watched Camilla smile and poke an index finger toward the sky as she pretended to count butterflies.

Camilla would always need special care, but to Emily's consolation, the woman's condition didn't prevent her from having a boyfriend, Chad, a man with high-functioning Down syndrome who visited their home twice a week and read her children's board books. Emily took steps to ensure no hanky-panky ensued, but she still worried if she had allowed gaps in her watchfulness…

The Amazons had retained the bins of purple element crystals. Kyle sold a specimen he had stashed in the diaper bag. The Smithsonian paid a hefty sum, and this money and gifts from around the planet allowed him to quit at the architectural firm and Emily to stop taking new patients. The 'pet tag' in his backside became infected, so he had it removed. With Emily's encouragement, he created his own acoustic company. With the sudden addition of a family and the onset of their shared busyness and responsibilities, including the birth of two daughters in succession, many of the conflicts Emily and he had before faded away. Maybe their interpersonal problems lurked in the background, or maybe they never were important…

A troop of children noisily unloaded from a school van, and Meliss was now giving them an impromptu lecture on monarch migration and how to begin butterfly sanctuaries in their yards and gardens. Herros had pulled out his camera and was capturing close-ups of monarchs feeding on a goldenrod cluster. Every once in a while, he and Meliss glanced at each other, probably reminding themselves they needed to return to their tagging work. The step-siblings never discussed it, but Emily knew they communicated telepathically-she herself picked up whispers of their thoughts, or was it only her motherly intuition?

"490," Kyle called out.

Camilla screeched, made faces, and waved her arms. She kept screeching until Emily came over and asked, "Where?" thinking Camilla might have seen some migrating broadwing hawks overhead.

Camilla grew still and gazed south across the green and autumnal red contours of the lower hills.

Emily pulled her jacket closer, much as she did her nightgown in the hotel room when she watched the majestic, surreal sunrise in Singapore years ago. Directly south, a striated patch of deep red sunbeam poured down, and not from the sun. The beam swept closer. Kyle saw it, too, and he, Asmara, and Slanda came to stand next to Camilla and Emily.

Meliss and Herros joined them. Their composed faces told Emily that they already knew what was happening. The beam settled around them, and both siblings glanced to an adjacent grassy area. Already waddling toward them was a young green woman wearing stitched scraps of cloth, her belly distended like birth was imminent. Meliss and Herros met and hugged her, then turning and each taking an arm, they led the girl to the Johnson huddle.

She stood fixed in place with her eyes downcast. Absent was the fierce arrogance and remoteness Emily had remembered in the faces of the Amazons.

"You might recognize a resemblance to her mother—the woman with the red braid," Herros said. "This woman you see is Aegea, the same pre-natal Aegea you knew years ago. Her own baby risked their lives and defied the Scythian hierarchy to bring them here from their new world."

The woman leaned sideways like she might fall. Meliss and Herros lowered her into a kneeling position.

She clasped her hands before her and searched from face to face. "Please," she said, "my mother, whose body you see, is sorry for what she said when she left you." She closed her eyes to absorb a passing contraction. "We're no better than you. Our element is diffused within our technology—it sublimates directly from the solid form and poisons our air. It dissolves into our water. It penetrates all non-living barriers. Rendering it safe is impossible. It's why our higher brain functions fail soon after the mother's body no longer protects us. Our people are stubborn. Most deny the element's poisonous quality and are unwilling to let our technology go. My mother passed shadows of her memories to me. Will you take care of us?" she asked. "Both of us, after I am born?"

Emily caught a movement in her peripheral vision. She turned to see who it was—probably a stranger who had taken an interest in the odd circle standing around a kneeling, green-painted woman.

To her surprise, it was Camilla, who said clear as day, "Of course, we will. Welcome to our growing family."

"Camilla!" Emily said. "What happened?... Oh." For an instant,

she was mortified that she hadn't kept closer watch on her and Chad. It must have happened last week when she dozed off on the couch while catching up on her favorite vlog. *But, no, this is better.* "Camilla, are you pregnant?"

"She *is* pregnant," Camilla's voice said. "Of course, she is. Fertilization concluded, sparking my life into existence."

Helped by Meliss and Herros, Aegea stiffly stood up.

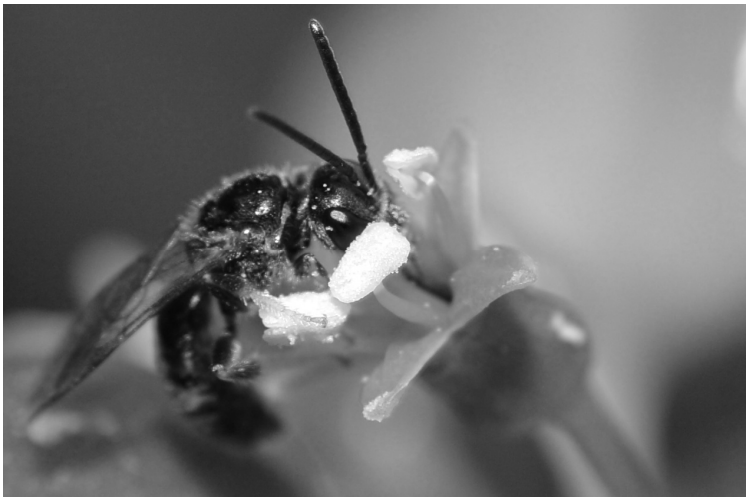
"What do you think, husband? Ready for new responsibility?" Emily playfully hip-bumped him.

He shifted to catch his balance, and a boyish grin flickered and then overwhelmed his face. Two butterflies at that moment floated over his head, darting toward each other in a delicate dance. "Okay with me." Spreading his arms as if to embrace the whole of Earth, he said, "There's always room for more, I guess. Just never, ever expect me to change any messy diapers." He gazed upward and flapped his arms down in dismay, slapping his thighs.

"Look!" Camilla was pointing again. High above, and from the perspective where Emily stood, nearly the same diminutive size as the butterflies passing over, more than two dozen Amazon gliders soared in graceful spirals, each vessel now angling its lacy blue wings for descent.

"We're not the only defectors," Aegea's child said.

END



Odd Fellows (jtb 2)

Grandma Middleton always guessed right. If you don't believe me, then explain how just a week after Grandpa's funeral she won a $251 million jackpot in the South Carolina Education Lottery. Anyway, because she didn't need outside information, and having been frugal all her life, she didn't pay for internet at her house. Which is why my cousin Duncan and I were spending Saturday afternoon using the Beaufort library's WiFi for our history assignment about heroes of the Revolutionary War.

At least *I* worked. Duncan kept staring toward the blonde librarian and sniffing. He removed his headphones, adjusted his hearing aids, and straightened the eyeglasses perched on his largish nose.

"She's twenty or more," I whispered. "Way too old for you."

"Introduce us, will you?"

"I don't know her."

"Introduce yourself first."

I smirked at him. "Okay, you asked for it."

We walked up together, Duncan bumping his knee into the counter.

"Hi, my name is Carlson Middleton," I said in my library voice. "I know Carlson is a weird name for a girl with brunette French braids and a feminine, but exceptionally fit 5-5 build. My deceased parents followed the fashion of giving girls the last names of presidents, or whatever. This here's my cousin. He's almost normal, except for his nose. Like me, he's not old enough to drive, but he thinks you're cute."

The blonde glared at me, and then him. "Excuse me, my shift is over." That's what she said in a Russian sounding accent. She gathered her bag, disappeared into the back room and emerged moments later wearing a green jacket. She had ignored us altogether.

With his eyes half-closed behind his thick glasses, Duncan breathed deeply.

"Stop it." I elbowed him in the ribs. "You're rude."

We followed her surreptitiously to the front door of the library. She went outside and stood by the curb as if waiting for a ride. I pretended to study the bulletin board, and couldn't help but notice the red, white, and blue trimmed poster with Governor Cobb's jovial facade plastered front and center. I snickered. The poster extolled the entertainment value and altruism of playing the South Carolina Education Lottery.

"You didn't give her my name," Duncan said with an air of injury. "And you *should* have told her she was mature."

"*What* are you talking about? Anyway, *her* name is Irina Grigorenko."

"How do you know?"

"Name tag, silly."

Irina seemed to be occupied with an incoming text when a burly man approached her and jerked a black sack over her head. She screamed and dropped her bag. A midnight blue van appeared out of nowhere. Another man joined the burly one and they wrestled her into the van and then raced away.

Duncan and I didn't need to discuss. We had to help her. We bolted from the library. He slid his hand down the rail and grabbed her bag, and I jumped on my bicycle.

Duncan fiddled with his bike lock. "Darn, I can't get the combination."

"Get on."

"What?"

"Get on my bike. Handlebars. Feet on the pegs."

"You're crazy," he said, inching his butt up while I held still. I pedaled us down the middle of the road, weaving between cars, but I couldn't see the van.

Duncan tilted his head back, sniffed the warm, humid air, and shouted, "Left. Turn left!"

I leaned the bike over, cut in front of a sporty, squealing Mazda, jumped the curb, dodged pedestrians, and dropped back onto the road, finishing with a 360 degree sliding spin on my rear tire.

"I didn't mean then, smarty!" Duncan shouted, breathing hard and still on the handlebars. "I meant at the stoplight! You're going to kill us."

"Listen, Bud, you're not going to die on a mountain bike with this girl. Besides, you've got the balance of an Olympian. Now where?"

He took another sniff and said, "Cross the bridge."

The Woods Memorial Bridge arched us over the Beaufort River, the openness and height bringing a refreshing breeze. We rode and rode, keeping in the bike lane now. Duncan directed a right turn and a left. The trail got colder until it took us outside Beaufort proper and left us standing by the road not knowing where to go next.

Ahead, a few miles east, was the end of South Carolina and the frontier of the Atlantic Ocean, and between it and us, water, stinky tidal flats, barrier islands, and fragrant pine-covered hammocks. Running north and south before us stretched a wide river, and on its western shore where we stood ran rows of elegant summer homes.

"The scent ends here," Duncan said. "The van was a 2007 Ford Econoline. You won't believe me, but every car's exhaust smells unique."

"Given our family talents, Duncan, I believe."

He had been wearing the blonde's bag around his neck, and he removed it, stuck his nose inside, and filled his lungs with its atmospheric contents.

"Strengthening her impression," he said.

"Oh?"

He squinted toward me through his lenses with a dirty look, which I ignored, then he sniffed the air several times. He gazed south. "She's down there."

We climbed back onto my bike and took the access road running behind the houses. At last we reached a dead end, a black gate, and one more house beyond. The property was surrounded by a heavy iron fence. Duncan dismounted and fell face down onto the pavement.

"You alright?" I asked.

He grunted as he creaked to his feet, then brushed his palms together to dislodge the tiny embedded rocks. "Okay. She's inside a house—the scent is fading. She's petrified. This is not her home."

"No kidding," I said. "It's the Governor's summer mansion. There's a sign saying so. Wide lush lawns. A fountain. White columns. With a titanic yacht at the dock! What are you doing?"

"Speed dialing a taxi."

"You take a taxi. I'm riding back," I said and pushed off.

"We're not leaving. We need to rescue her."

"Here? You were *delusional* for wanting to meet her." At this point I circled back and rode tight loops around Duncan while he held his phone to his ear.

"She needs our help. Now."

"Call the police, not a taxi."

"The Governor? The police are probably in the scheme."

"Okay. You asked for it."

I had already noticed how to scale the fence, so without a pause I headed toward the bin-sized green electrical box and jumped the bike on top.

"Wait!" Duncan called.

A couple hops, and then another jump with a 90-degree turn, and I was on the fence's top flat edge.

"I've got a *better* idea," Duncan sang out.

I rode along the fence for 30 meters until I came to a cluster of trees and jumped the bike down on the other side. I thought the trees would give cover, but a red ATV was already speeding in my direction, the driver and his pal glowering. No problem. I started for the house and the ATV made a wide arc and followed. He was on my tail zigging back and forth and pressing tracks into the thick grass. I scanned ahead and found the perfect tree surrounded by a mulched bed. Getting up

speed, I aimed straight for it, the ATV still right behind. My little maneuver in the mulch kicked up a dust cloud. I struck the tree hard, the bike and I zoomed up several meters, hit the upcurved branch, flipped, and completed a loop to the ground. The ATV and its blinded occupants smashed into the tree trunk.

Poor tree. Seriously.

Now for the house, its vast, complicated roof an untrammeled, never-before-explored bike park festooned with dormers and a widow's walk. An upstairs window was open. I jumped onto a banister for the handicapped ramp, then to the wooden fence around the pool, rode on top the length of the pool, then, gathering myself, concentrated with all my might, and jumped onto the roof. Easy. Just then a text message rang in. Duncan.

W*hat you doing, crazy?* He always speaks his texts.

rescue ur girl

Not that way!

i can get her out

"Come down, bitch!" A couple security guys in green golf shirts now stood below me, looking up.

"Don't 'bitch' me, you…" and the rest of what I yelled with my ample vocabulary seemed to so shock the southerly breeze that she sucked in her breath.

Duncan texting: *Taxi coming. Draw beasts to back. Stall.*

Me: *why*

I rode to a ridgeline and crossed over. A half minute later, green shirts collected on the ground in back, only they comprised a platoon by now and carried guns. Two others were inching toward me on the roof. The front gate had opened, and the taxi was cruising in. He sure arrived fast. I pedaled around trying a few quick runs across roof hips and valleys and keeping out of the goons' reach. Up close those guys didn't look like employees of a governor. More like dumbbell-jerking gangstas.

Duncan: *Got her. Go. Go.*

Huh? Well, okay. Yeah. I rode to the highest peak and scanned the scene until a gangsta creeping near reached out like a zombie, and I lifted my feet to start a long run. Down, down, and up, finding air. Double forward flip. Land on back tire and recover. Jump across to a garage, then the roofs of one, two, three limos and one black SUV, then to the ground. Hear the cracking of gunfire and swerve to dodge bullets left and right, smack into one of the goons who tried to grab me, and I finally sprint out the open gate. You'd appreciate the beauty and gracefulness. I only wished I'd brought my MoJoe camera. Left it at the library, along with our backpacks and laptops.

Duncan was waiting by the taxi. "What took you? Mosquitoes are driving me bonkers. Gimme your lock."

"Why?"

"Just give it."

I did. He slapped at himself and waved the taxi forward, its trunk lifting open. The blonde in the front passenger side was biting her thumbs and glancing toward the house.

One of the roof-dented limos arrived as the gate closed. Duncan leaped to lock the gate to the post with my cable. Or, he thought so. He had locked the gate to itself.

"Alright," he said cheerfully. "They can't follow."

A gangsta exploded from each side of the limo and drew weapons, but must have received orders via their earpieces, because they reholstered and waited for the gate to reopen, grimacing like fools.

I fixed the lock placement without Duncan or the gangstas noticing. The gate's motor engaged and promptly jammed. The gangstas lost their grins, threw themselves at the gate and shook it. One started climbing. I ran and tossed my bike into the trunk, which wouldn't close all the way, and I scrambled into the taxi.

"This is Irina," Duncan beside me said, beaming with pride.

"We've already met, you know." The Russian accent again.

"Where to?" the taxi driver said, saucer-eyed and gasping. "Shouldn't we hurry?"

~

We called for an emergency family conference.

Duncan, Grandma Middleton, Uncle Al, and Irina and I gathered that evening around the walnut table within the humongous porch of our house on the 'Ranch'. In the fading evening light, the view overlooked an emerald pasture like a wide sea broken by archipelagos of trees. Duncan, seated next to Uncle Al, kept screwing up his face and shuddering as he no doubt smelled a parade of diverse stenches wafting through the screens, smells undetectable to the rest of Earth's entire human population.

The spring evening's coolness felt good. Uncle Al lowered his vacant gaze from the ceiling and rose for courtesy's sake when Irina and Grandma shuffled out to us, each bearing a tray, one loaded with iced tea and the other a raspberry dessert.

"Ah, just what I needed." Uncle Al rubbed his belly and sat back down as Irina served him. "I'll take three of those tiny dishes, if you don't mind."

"The tea is jasmine buds wrapped in green tea leaves," Irina said.

"And she made the dessert, too, from scratch," Grandma said, scooting her rocking chair forward to the table. "We are friends al-

ready. Another daughter."

I took my snack to a corner to watch night coming on.

Irina had told us her basic story on the way home, but to decide what to do about the kidnapping, we needed a fuller account, Uncle Al said.

"I was so scared," Irina began. "I remembered the stories my father told of the Soviet Union under Stalin. Many of my relatives disappeared in the Gulag. A few returned. I felt like I was living their experience."

"What happened at the Governor's?" Uncle Al asked.

"They told me to take a bath, and they gave me some lovely clothes. What I'm wearing."

I wouldn't call a black evening gown designed in Milan and a cashmere sweater "lovely," but then I wear Goodwill for everyday and REI for fancy occasions.

Uncle Al continued. "Then what?"

"A fretful man, not one of the thugs, came and told me they had made a horrible mistake. He said it was the Governor's son's birthday, and the abduction was a joke. They mistook me for the son's girlfriend."

"Bullcrap," I said.

"The man told me the girlfriend knew about a surprise, but not exactly what. He apologized repeatedly and gave me $500 'for my trouble'. But I had to sign a statement saying I was well treated and agreeing to not tell anyone." She covered her mouth with her hand. "Am I breaking my agreement?"

"We *saw* it, Irina," I said. "Duncan reasoned if anyone came ringing their bell and asked for her, they'd panic and let her go. The taxi driver had no idea what he was walking into and did his job superbly."

"Really?" Uncle Al said. "Why didn't they pretend ignorance?"

"Because the taxi driver told the doorman Irina had a date with a Marine officer, and he and cohorts would be looking for her."

"Good thinking, Duncan," Uncle Al said.

Duncan turned to Irina. "Uncle Al is the thinker. He performs complex math in his head while long-haul driving."

Uncle Al chuckled. "Keeps me awake. Some people, like Grandma, work crossword puzzles."

Thus far Grandma had been sitting like a motionless panda bear with either a faint frown or smile, depending. She was now smiling. "Crosswords are easy. Your math is too easy, Al. For a real knotty problem, give me a jigsaw puzzle and a time limit."

Grandma wasn't kidding. If the question was about a fact, any fact, even a future one, she always guessed right, which is how she won the

lottery and bought the Ranch.

After she and Grandpa Middleton married, he threw their money at lottery tickets and never won more than a few dollars. He never let her pick numbers. He never followed her advice on anything, and they lived in poverty. So, the day after his funeral, Grandma bought a ticket and won the $251 million jackpot. We grandkids always knew her ability because she was a killer at Jeopardy. Odd thing is, she never wonders why. She only says in her innocent granny voice, "I let my mind go blank and say the first thing that pops into my head."

Uncle Al won't let her buy any more tickets because that would arouse suspicion. She doesn't care, because she's richer than she ever dreamed possible and living with me and Duncan in our big house. Big. Fifty thousand square feet on a hundred rolling acres northwest of Beaufort…

"Why are you making a face, Duncan?" I asked, seeing him wrinkling his nose.

"Someone pooted."

Everyone glanced around for a clue to the guilty party.

"Probably upwind a mile away," I said.

"Was a horse."

"I think," Uncle Al said, moving on. "I think maybe we should leave this kidnapping matter alone. It was a practical joke gone awry. It's not possible the Governor is mixed up in such an unthinkable business. He's a leading candidate for President."

Irina suddenly burst into tears and Grandma frowned like when my parents died in the motorcycle accident. When Irina recovered her voice she asked, "What do you think, Mrs. Middleton? Was it a joke?"

Grandma closed her eyes, and she wasn't only frowning now. Tears flowed down her cheeks, too. She opened her eyes and blinked rapidly. "I guess it was… and I blush to say the words, the Governor's people wanted you for a sex slave. They expected to make a lot of money. Your abductors meant to sell you."

We were stunned. Grandma's guesses were as good as Gospel. Were as good as trial by jury. Were almost as good as God Himself speaking in an audible voice. Were as good as the founder's original intentions for the Constitution.

At this juncture I was happy Uncle Al was present. He was the only one with the brain power to guide us. "What is it about you, Irina?" he asked. "They don't pick women at random."

Irina stared ahead. Grandma's face was working with emotion. Irina sighed and said, "My parents moved back to Russia. I'm here alone. The other night at a club I met a young man. He asked me questions. I trusted him. He seemed kind and didn't make improper ad-

vances. I was looking forward to seeing him again—he was supposed to meet me after work today. He talked about marriage and told me about his family, that they were religious, you know. I confided in him that I was chaste, you know. That I believe in waiting for marriage. He agreed."

Crap. He had interrogated her to see if she was a virgin because they command high prices. We all knew.

Uncle Al said, "Okay then. You should live here with Grandma. She has plenty of room. Is that okay with you Grandma?"

Grandma nodded. "We'd love to have you. My house feels so empty. I should have bought something smaller."

"I can cook," Irina said. "What *will* we do next?"

We all thought for awhile, then Duncan said that since going to the police was iffy, we might get his father involved, a Marine Corps Colonel who worked at the air base in Beaufort. Uncle Al suggested that we go to the press, the state legislative leaders, and the Attorney General.

"If they abducted me," Irina said, "surely other girls have been kidnapped too, and we must do something swiftly. What do you think, Grandma?"

Grandma closed her eyes, opened them and said, "Y'all are part wrong. But we can't act until after the Easter Reunion."

~

Duncan and I couldn't wait. All we could think of were the poor girls trapped in the pervert Governor's sordid sex slave network. So we and a half-dozen school friends cooked up an idea. We secretly bought poster board, brushes, paint, and wooden lath and made signs including ripped-off pictures of the Guv from his lottery propaganda. Then on a stormy afternoon, we rode bikes to his mansion and stood outside the gate.

Our soggy signs said,

"Stop Sex Traffic Now!"
"Cobb is a Crook"
"Free the Girls!"
"Arrest Cobb"
"Kidnapping is Krime"

It was cheesy, but we were serious. We had sent out press releases and called reporters, but no one believed us, and if they did, based on the last election coverage, they probably were insiders and would suppress the truth. It also could have been the deluge of rain. In short, no reporters showed up.

State patrol showed up. An officer who'd peel paint with his fiery glare, strutted from his cruiser, water dripping from his hat's brim.

"May I see your permit?" he said.

Duncan handed the officer a damp, pocket-sized edition of the Bill of Rights and said, "The First Amendment."

"Hilarious," the officer said without the trace of a smile. "Do your parents know you're here?"

"My parents are dead," I said. "Do your mommy and daddy know you're harassing an orphan and protecting a corrupt Governor?"

His face didn't even twitch. All he said was, "Your parents or guardians will be upset when you all are arrested for protesting without a permit and when they get sued for slander. They'll lose custody and you'll land in the foster care system."

That was a low blow. But we knew he was bluffing.

Right then the officer received a call on his cell phone. He walked away. A minute later he returned. "How long will you stay?" he asked.

"Until dark."

"I'll just wait here so you don't trespass again."

And that's what he did. We knew then he was one of the pawns… *prawns* in the Governor's sordid gumbo. We also knew that whoever mattered knew we knew the truth. And that had to have scared them. We hoped so. It scared us, too.

~

On Monday after a government agent called to threaten Grandma with child protective services, that amazing lady told us she wasn't worried and promised to include us in her plan. "I understand your impatience, dear," she said. "Waiting hurts me, too."

If Grandma showed warm grace about our protest, Duncan's Marine Corps dad displayed pallid anger. Duncan lived at Grandma's house because he and his dad didn't get along so well, and when the Colonel rushed over after work, he brought his personal, command-presence aerial bombardment. I'm sure he didn't know he shouted loud enough for me to hear through the solid oak parlor doors.

"What are you trying to prove with your shenanigans?"

I couldn't hear Duncan, but I guess he explained the situation.

"I get it," the Colonel boomed, "but waving signs won't do a bit of good. It draws attention to yourself."

We had to try. That's what I think Duncan would say.

"Okay. If you want to help the world, follow my example."

But I want to be a doctor. Yep. He'd say that.

"I'm enrolling you in a military academy tomorrow."

But I don't want to leave my friends. I like living at Grandma Middleton's.

"That's the problem, isn't it? Hanging out with this eccentric family."

I'm one of them.

"You should be living with me."

You don't have a real home.

"That hurts. I don't have money and a massive house."

Hmm. I'm not sure how Duncan would reply here.

"I'm not making *that* mistake again," the Colonel said. "Your mother had power to hypnotize people? And she never knew? Bull. I *thought* I was head over heels in love, but it turns out I was bamboozled."

Same thing, in my opinion. When she was my age, as the story goes, Duncan's mom would walk up to men and say "Give me your money," and they did, happily, eyes twinkling. This was before Grandma won the lottery. Duncan's mom and dad married young and after he was born, she ran away to New Mexico to start a commune.

Was Duncan suggesting his dad remarry?

"She's Russian?"

I knew it! Duncan probably said he knows by their scents that Irina and his dad are a biological match.

After that last question, it was quiet for a long while. Apparently, Duncan was telling his dad how sweet and beautiful Irina was. I pressed my ear to the door. I could hear Duncan's soft wah, wah, wah, but no consonants.

"Stop." The Colonel spoke in a normal volume now, but I still heard him say, "Graduate from high school, pick any college and enroll in ROTC. Once you qualify as an officer, the Marine Corps will hone your skills. Or, we'll skip college and give you an individualized training program. We need you to fight terrorism, Duncan."

"To Hell with military school!"

I heard *that*. I backed away from the door and assumed a demure posture. Hands folded in front, head down, but watching covertly.

The parlor doors flew open, Duncan's father frowned, marched to the main entrance of the mansion, and I'm sure he didn't know he slammed the decorative door so hard its windows cracked.

Duncan snuffled a couple times and brushed past me up to his room.

~

Easter Reunion at the Ranch. The highlight of every year.

You might think it boring, but not so. Not with our weird family, but even more fun were the new people, the Lottery Kin. Ever since Grandma won, relatives by the score pop out of the woodwork. The peculiar thing is, most are real, or adopted. My job was to scout them and sign them up on the giant Family Tree in the foyer. Grandma never lets me turn anyone away, not even lying freeloaders. We wouldn't

give away money, but we served heaping platters of grilled seafood delivered fresh from the Gay Fish Company (an old family name) and hauled iced tea in buckets. All free and as much as anyone wanted. We filled every room of the mansion with overnight guests and even had a large encampment down by the fishing pond. Portajohns, electric hook-ups, a rented big-top tent, and live entertainment every night, and a sunrise worship service on Easter morn.

Rain had washed the sky clean and left us with faultless weather. More strangers than usual came this year. Oddly, some of them edged away from me. They kept away from everyone. I told Uncle Al, and he said he'd look out for trouble.

An hour before lunch on Saturday, and I had already sent a couple dozen distant cousins-to-the-9th-degree to the genealogy station when someone caught my eye. He seemed to be in his mid-thirties, and might have been a movie star except for the naked expression of skepticism planted on his face. Like, he really didn't want to be here. I rode up on my bike, noticed he wasn't wearing a wedding ring, and asked, "Who are you?"

He smiled in a way that made my stomach flutter and said, "I'm looking for someone called 'Grandma'. Grandma Middleton." His voice sounded familiar.

"Oh, she's busy now with the jigsaw puzzle races. You couldn't pull her away with a— How can I help you?"

He looked at me askance.

"Believe me. I represent Grandma. Whatever your business, you deal with me."

"Okay," he said, but I think he was humoring me. "Grandma… Is she *your* grandmother?"

"You may safely assume."

"Let's talk somewhere private."

"Then, this time of day, that would be… nowhere. A bathroom."

He cleared his throat.

"Alright. Do you ride? I can get you a bike."

"How about if we sit in my car?"

This creeped me out. I was thinking of Irina's horrible experience. "Let's sit *on* your car. Where is it?"

"Never mind. Let's walk."

He walked. I rode.

"Please, let me start over. My name is Jonathan T. Barron and I'm a host of a nationally syndicated radio program. I—"

"Oh!" I interrupted, "JTB. Grandma is a huge fan-girl of yours. I heard about that wild skirmish in western North Carolina. The tree monsters. You were in the middle of it all."

"Mostly as a spectator."

I lowered my voice to ask, "Are you here to investigate the sex trafficking?"

"The what?" He turned beet red.

Interesting. "Umm. Why *are* you here?"

"Your grandmother says she has a grandson who sees with his nose. I mean, he has the sense of smell superior to a bloodhound."

"That's not so special," I said, probably pouting. "Everyone in our family, I mean, who is really related, has an ability."

"Such as?"

"Hey, let me introduce you."

I had by then figured out Grandma's scheme. Lure JTB in and recruit him to help take down the Governor. So, I organized the tour for the best effect. First, Uncle Sharp who excels at horseshoes. Never misses. The only excitement is from how far away, or how high, or how many spins and twists. Continuous clanking coming from that corner. Roars and cheers arising from the spectators.

Next, the guy who hears voices. As he puts it, sound disturbs the foundation of language and releases "meaning." A door squeak tells him it's time to pick up the mail. If the door keeps squeaking, he hears a lecture on economic socialism. I've been told "water" tinkling into the commode really bothers him. He also understands animals, because their sounds connect to real meaning. 'What crows talk about!' he says. Mockingbirds drive him insane. Grandma spent a fortune on him for psychiatrists until Uncle Al just said to wear hearing protection and learn sign language. I call him Earmuff Guy."

We watched him signing by himself in a slow, martial-arts-like dance.

"You *sure* he's not crazy?" JTB said.

I shrugged.

"I could do a month of programs here already."

Gone was his trademarked skepticism. That was nice, though I thought he was only being polite, and I said, "Then that's enough introductions for now." I next showed JTB the rope swings, the swimming pool, the horse barn, and the auction tent where people sold stuff for charity.

"Where's your relative with the extraordinary sense of smell?"

"Gotcha. He's indisposed. His father's here, *again*. I'll show you, and it'll explain."

We walked behind the skateboard park where the bike track was. Under a cluster of pecan trees at a picnic table sat Duncan's father straight up in his dress Marine Corps uniform. Duncan was standing nearby, his back to his dad. Not a happy picture. Duncan had his

glasses off and was wiping his eyes.

"A family crisis?"

"Umm. His dad believes Duncan's abilities would be a phenomenal asset to defeating our enemies. But Duncan believes he can learn to diagnose disease and save thousands of lives. That's been his dream."

"Admirable."

A phalanx of helicopters chugged high overhead interrupting our conversation, a common thing near the airbase. As JTB looked up, his knees wobbled and he grabbed my handlebar to steady himself. I glanced at him, his face pale and clammy.

When the airships were mostly gone, I sighed big.

"What's that about?" JTB asked, still pale, but steadier.

"A dream of mine. Are you alright? My dad sneezed whenever he looked up."

"I served in Afghanistan. The helos brought back a memory."

Just then Duncan's father turned, nodded to JTB, and walked away toward the parking area.

"Does he know you?" I asked.

"Maybe. Ask Duncan if I can talk with him."

"Not a good time."

"I need to know if he'll let me interview him for my radio program."

"Gotcha. You asked for it."

I went to Duncan and gave him a hug after which I presented JTB's question. He said exactly what I thought he would before he stormed away.

"And that was…? JTB asked.

"He said you can go straight to Hades, but I wouldn't take him too literally."

We watched Duncan for a moment. He kicked at a stray soccer ball and missed.

"His father enrolled him in a private high school, starting next fall. Up east."

"I've wasted a trip, then." His face scrunched up, maybe in disappointment. Then he brightened with hopefulness. "Unless you have a special ability?"

"You're not quite done. You have to meet Grandma Middleton." We bee-lined for the house and the game wing. I leaned my bicycle against a sweetgum tree in front.

"Your bike looks new," JTB said. "Sturdy, thick tires."

"It's a pro-grade mountain stunt model, custom geared for road riding. I've had it four years."

"But not a scratch or nick."

"I never crash and never will."

"Is this your unusual gift?"

I scoffed and walked through the front doorway. We moved along passageways into the ballroom where the chess tournament was. Irina and Uncle Al were battling it out in the center of the room. Irina had said she was trained from a child, but Uncle Al was a purebred natural, and so it seemed an even match.

JTB circled through the room and returned. "The girl's sharp," he whispered.

As I told JTB about Irina's story, you could see him forgetting the nonsense about *our* family. I mean, we had our kinks, I said, but otherwise we were normal. Irina was the needy one, and not her so much, but those girls held in captivity.

"All those like Irina who won't be rescued unless you help us bust this evil crime ring," I said. "This is real. See Irina? How many girls like her are enslaved?"

He adopted a poker face, and the sounds of the chess games pushed into hearing. Click of a piece being moved. Slap on a chess clock. The word, "Check." I didn't know what was playing in his head, but the longer JTB pondered, the more likely he was to join our team. When he smiled to himself, I knew I had him hooked. He glanced at me and said, "I'm ready to meet Grandma."

Thought so. His conscience speaking.

We went next door to the jigsaw puzzle room. If the chess tournament was intense and ponderous, this space was light-hearted and busy. The room was full of wide tables. Each contestant kept a talkative assistant who organized the 5000 pieces, with the contestant studying the box, picking a piece up and turning it, sometimes fitting it into place and sometimes exchanging it for another. For fairness, everyone worked on identical puzzles, the image a painting of a young mother who was hand sewing, with her rosy-cheeked daughter leaning onto the mother's lap.

Hands moved fast.

"Grandma's in the pink and green dress."

"Are jigsaw puzzles her gift?"

"Heavens, no. Grandma always guesses right about everything. She probably guessed you'd be here now. But you can't guess at jigsaw puzzles and that's why she loves them."

Grandma looked up at JTB and suddenly grinned. She abandoned her puzzle, leaving her stunned assistant gaping, and came over to us. "So pleased to meet you in person, Mr. Jonathan T. Barron, when I have only heard your voice. She stood up on tiptoe and whispered in his ear.

JTB sighed and nodded.

"Do you mind, dear?" she said to me. "I need to talk with Mr. Barron. Anyway, you have your upcoming bike workshop with the children."

~

After the square dance that evening, everyone went to bed early. Grandma had invoked a strict quiet time because she wanted everyone to be fresh for the sunrise service.

The music Sunday morning under the big tent was awe inspiring. A couple of local churches joined us, and they brought a combined adult and children's choir, with handbells and two keyboards going at once. If it didn't raise the dead, it did raise goosebumps. I was transported. The sermon, however, was the usual nap inducer, something about how even though the apostles faced a grisly martyrdom, none confessed the resurrection to be a sham. How a preacher can make such a fascinating topic boring was a true miracle.

The preacher pitched a half-hearted altar call, and as an organ softly wandered from chord to chord, a handful of worshipers started forward. The preacher met them in front of the stage. The whispering, kneeling, and praying wound down, and the preacher re-mounted the steps. A few strangers had arrived late, and one of them, a pale, pock-marked woman wearing slacks and a polo shirt, followed him to the podium.

The preacher leaned into the mic. "After the service—"

But the stranger cut him off, saying, "Excuse me, may I?" and gestured to the microphone.

The bewildered preacher stepped aside.

The stranger pulled a sheaf of papers from her back pocket. "Good morning everyone. I hate to disrupt your party, but I'm with the Department of Heath and Environmental Control. My helpers and I found twenty-three violations on the property this weekend. For example, major Portaloo spillage next to the outdoor kitchen and dining pavilion, with potential food contamination—your lunch, in fact. Also, your hosts failed to secure permits. Therefore, for your safety, I'm afraid we're closing the event. We've closed the swimming pool, too. You all will have to leave. Sorry to disrupt your day, but someone might be hurt, particularly a child. Pastor, I'll turn the proceedings back to you."

I wanted to bellow it was a truckload of bullcrap, but the preacher raised his hand and mumbled a benediction. When he pronounced the final Amen, everyone yakked at once, while the stranger, still at the microphone boomed, "Please go to your cars now and leave."

The other strangers, who reminded me of the Governor's gangsters, handed out flyers. I grabbed one, a court order signed by a judge.

The visitors pretty much herded to the parking lots, anxious to be in the best position for racing to the restaurants, since they couldn't eat the mountains of fried chicken and potato salad waiting at the pavilion.

I ran up to Uncle Al and asked, "What'll we do?"

Duncan ran up, his eyes smoldering behind his glasses. "Let's fight," he said.

Uncle Al stepped to the microphone, but the cord had been unplugged. He cupped his hands. "They can't make you leave!"

Not many heard him. Duncan reconnected the power, but too late, and I started calling the guest's phone numbers we had. Uncle Al dashed to the house in his electric cart. We tried to convince people to stay, but the goons worked harder to intimidate them. They swarmed the place and taped off everything. By the time the dust settled, the only guests remaining were relatives with Monday flights from Charleston, Duncan's and my friends whose parents weren't there, and JTB, who had kept in the background during this whole mess. We gathered at a shady corner of the dining pavilion to eat of the lonely food. The goons traipsing over the property couldn't care less if we ate anything "contaminated." The portable outhouses that had mysteriously tipped over were two hundred yards downwind. JTB and Earmuff Guy attempted to converse, which looked awkward because JTB didn't know sign language.

Grandma said and everyone agreed that the Governor was behind this harassment.

"There's nothing we can do till tomorrow morning," Uncle Al said, "but at least we should protest to the supervisor."

"She's at the swimming pool," Duncan said. "I already told her what *I* think."

"Good, son," Uncle Al said. He patted his mouth with a napkin, then drove away with Grandma in the electric cart. Duncan, me, and our five friends rode our bikes. JTB, Irina, Earmuff Guy, and a few others hurried behind on foot.

We kids passed the cart and arrived first. So many more goons than we expected. We were outnumbered three to one. Many of them were lounging at the café tables under umbrellas, with heaping plates of food before them. When we rode up, a few looked frantically for a place to hide the guilty booty. One laughed and stuffed a forkful into his mouth. Closing the swimming pool really irked me—I had worn my two piece bathing suit under my church clothes. To cool off and show I wouldn't let them ruin our day, I stripped off my blouse and skirt, climbed the ladder to the board, paced three steps, bounced, and swan-dived into the pool. The goons at the café tables cheered when I surfaced, and one wolf-whistled when I climbed out dripping wet and joined my friends. I

was tempted to flip the goons the bird.

The pale Supervisor walked toward us and eyed me closely. I plugged one nostril and blew the other, then wiped my nose with the back of my hand. She shuddered, glanced aside, and nodded to a couple goons who were standing beside her.

They grabbed my arms. Then someone grabbed my bike.

"Let me go, you animals!" I slipped from their grasp and they grabbed me around the waist and neck.

"Hey!" someone shouted.

"Give my bike back!"

"What the Hell are you doing?" someone else shouted.

"Get off her!"

Yelling, punching, and kicking, our friends attacked, but the goons easily pushed them down. Then a goon threw my bike into a nearby midnight blue van. The more I struggled, the more they tightened their grips until it hurt.

I howled, "Let me go. Give me my bike back!"

Uncle Al and Grandma wheeled up, Al with his shaking fists clenched like he might throw a pile driver punch. I bumped a gun inside one of my captor's belts and really became afraid.

Grandma said, "Let me handle this, Al, please."

Like a queen condescending to a common bully, Grandma advanced toward the Supervisor.

"Why are you holding my grand-daughter?"

"We have a court order, ma'am. You're not the legal guardian of this child."

"Is that so? I'm her closest living relative."

"It's only my opinion, ma'am, but from the look of this place, the child hasn't been properly looked after. Twenty-three health and safety violations. We have affidavits swearing she's been running loose unsupervised in the streets. The girl will be appointed a *guardian ad litem* who will protect her interests. You'll be able to petition the court to gain guardianship. Until then, she'll be placed in foster care."

"You mean, jail," I said. "I want my bicycle."

"Listen, Grandma." Here the Supervisor spoke no louder than Grandma Middleton and I could hear. Her pockmarks burned red in her whitewashed face. "Your grandchild won't be harmed as long as you keep away from the Governor's business. Stay out of politics. Otherwise, no telling what could happen." The woman leaned forward and whispered. "She's insurance."

The stragglers had arrived in the middle of this menacing threat. JTB hung back but Earmuff Guy waded into our midst. The two goons pulled me toward their van and I screamed.

Other goons drew their pistols. All my family stood frozen and helpless. All but Earmuff Guy, but he wasn't wearing his earmuffs. He began wailing, waving his arms, and babbling incoherently. The air seemed full of the noise of bubbling, boiling mud pots like at Yellowstone Park. Earmuff stopped screaming and swung around wildly, listening.

"The vampires will come," he croaked at last, then he spun in a circle, faster and faster, emitting a fierce buzzing noise.

"I've seen enough," the Supervisor said, unfazed. "Let's go, men. Stick her in the van. If anyone resists, cuff them and toss them in with her."

I looked around for Duncan because it would be like him to get arrested, but he was gone. The bubbling mud pots grew in intensity, and Earmuff's buzzing rose in pitch to merge with a whine at the upper limit of human hearing. It settled over us like a hovering, throbbing, flying saucer, numbing the senses.

Everyone was gazing up.

An opaque cloud that jittered like static on an old TV screen descended. Mosquitoes, and they swathed my captors in an instant as if the men had sprouted fur coats. Now *they* were screaming, and slapping themselves.

A few insects bumped into me, and they were in my eyes and ears. Suddenly free, I zipped away, intending to hide in our secret, prohibition-era wine closet, but as I approached the house, two goons jumped from behind a van, grabbed me, and yanked a bag over my head. I broke loose, screamed, kicked, and punched. They snatched me again and tie-strapped my arms, and I felt a sharp prick in my thigh. Then I was roughly tossed into the van. The door slammed and I faded from consciousness.

~

Apparently, Earmuff's communication with nature was two-way.

I'm upset because I had planned to spend the day playing freeze tag in the water with my friends, then keep-away, and sharks and minnows, then there was supposed to be a dive competition and the belly flop contest. I'd ride up the ladder and jump the high dive with a bike. Duncan would swim laps then sit in the shade and listen to a book on tape. A perfect day spoiled. Worst of all, I'll never see my lucky bicycle again. Oh, my gosh, I've been kidnapped!

I opened my eyes and blinked. I was lying on a couch, groggy, with a thin blanket over me. It took a second for my eyes to focus.

"You're the smart little vixen, aren't you?" I swiveled my head toward the speaker, and it was the supervisor woman who had been wearing slacks and a polo shirt. Only now, she had on a business suit. New

pimples covered her face, which had been slathered in pink calamine lotion. Ah, the mosquitoes.

I tried to sit up, but my feet and wrists were strapped. My heart rate jumped, and I started panting.

"No one's going to touch you, Carlson. What's wrong with your parents, giving you a name so ugly? No one will touch you, but you might see and hear something you won't like. Now, will you behave? Can we remove the restraints?"

"I'm not promising anything."

"There, at least the fox isn't snapping her teeth." She nodded to two gangsters, who cut me loose.

I sat up, rubbed my wrists, and looked around. The room was strange and formal. Big, but not as big as my bedroom. I was only wearing my bathing suit, it was still damp and I felt cold. The blanket hadn't helped. From my first glances, I guessed I was in the Governor's summer mansion, but that couldn't be right because everything was too modern. I wrapped the blanket around me, went to the window only to see the sun setting between two looming skyscrapers. This was not coastal South Carolina.

"Atlanta, Carlson. Governor Cobbs is announcing his presidential campaign tonight, and we have some wealthy guests attending the gala here at the Hotel U. The other girls arrived by bus yesterday. I'll have work for you, too. Easy, light work." Her sickening smile said she was enjoying the thought.

"I need to pee," I said. "I'm hungry."

The door opened and a pretty girl lilted in carrying a long decorative box. She set the box on a counter, and turning to leave gave me a quick wink. Not a mischievous wink, but conveying solidarity, like she knew me already.

The Supervisor opened the box and removed a deep blue sleeveless dress—my size if not a tad small—clearly intended to be alluring. "Take your shower and put on the dress. Oh, and there's supposed to be underthings." She glanced at a goon, who hurried out. "Your first guest may arrive soon."

I'm sure I showed all kinds of alarm.

"Don't worry, nobody will touch you. They'll be creepy, but you'll get used to it. This type of client likes to talk."

"I might say a few things he won't like," I said, already composing new insults.

"Oh, the clients especially love this. You should realize that if your family doesn't keep their traps shut about the Governor, it won't be polite, gentleman voyeurs, but hungry, urgent men with money. Lots of them. Lots of money. Tonight is to let y'all know we mean business."

"I want to talk with Grandma." The fear in my voice and tears in my eyes weren't acted.

"We're talking with her. She knows what's happening." She leaned back and looked me up and down. "As cute as you are in your bathing suit and blanket, it's not quite appropriate for tonight. So, shower. Brush your hair. Wear the dress. We'll have a beautician see you within the hour." She and the goons left, and the door shut with a mechanical jolt.

I looked out the window again—no escape there, twenty stories high and the windows wouldn't open. Adjoining this room was another room with a king-sized bed. Everything in this place was expensive. Leather upholstery. Boutique furniture, like pieces in an art gallery. Watercolors on the walls. Hardwood floors and Persian rugs. Neon accent lights and stainless steel. Ovals and squares. A thick, hand woven bedcover, which I wrapped around me instead of the blanket. Sculptures of naked men and women. Faceted mirrors, like at Grandma's. A mini bar with imported distilled spirits. A solid wooden table. The refrigerator stocked with food and bottled beverages.

When I jiggled the door handle, a man outside said in a muffled voice, "Forget it, girl."

I ran to the bathroom to pee, came back to the kitchenette and helped myself to some yogurt, almonds, and a banana.

The dress. Like a poisonous snake. Simple in design, gorgeous, but dangerous. I held it up, draping it before me in a mirror. Not bad, I thought. Surprisingly heavy, the cloth itself was exquisite, soft, and was composed of many subtle blues blended together. I almost could pretend I was a beauty.

Umm… No.

Even if it were my style, I couldn't wear the dress. I couldn't play along that far. I wouldn't give them what they wanted. I tossed the dress onto the box and then noticed a tiny folded scrap of blue paper on the floor. I opened it and read.

"HELP US, CARLSON!" it said. Then it had the number "34."

The note must have fallen from the folds of the dress.

When the door unlocked and the male beautician arrived with two goons, I was sitting on the couch, un-showered, watching television. The beautician obviously had encountered reluctance before and made only a feeble effort to tempt me.

"These genuine blue diamond earrings and pendant will be fabulous on you, honey," he said in a pinched, tenor voice. "They're my favorite. They'll just glorify your eyes."

I said nothing and continued staring at the TV.

He said, "You don't need makeup," and shrugged his shoulders.

Upon leaving, he said to the guard, "Be nice, will you? After all, it's her first time."

The Supervisor stormed into the room. She didn't waste any words, but nervously fretted and steamed as the goons stripped the place of every sheet, towel, blanket, or piece of cloth. They even tore the curtains from the windows. Lastly, they ripped the bedcover from my body. I stood there glaring.

"Okay," she said finally. "You know, your bathing suit will do fine. A visitor will be arriving soon. The Governor just finished his speech. It was a good'un."

They left me alone. I was scared. I knew Grandma would guess where I was and Uncle Al might *try* something, but I didn't know what. Our family had special gifts, but I couldn't think of anyone who had a skill that would help this situation.

Using the gorgeous dress would be better than only wearing my bathing suit, so I draped it around my hips and knotted it at the waist, sat on a chair, and waited.

If only I had my bicycle…

The waiting. Fear turned into anxiety. Anxiety turned into dread. Dread turned into horror and humiliation. Humiliation turned into panic, and I began hyperventilating. The lights dimmed and I heard a roaring until I realized I was passing out, and strangely I knew then I had the power to deal with these feelings. I did it all the time without thinking when I did crazy stuff on the bicycle. All I needed to do was breathe deliberately, slowly, and imagine riding. Trust my gift. I pictured gliding along my most challenging urban trail between Grandma's and school. I had ridden it a hundred times. The trail was incredibly technical. I could do it and recite Shakespeare at the same time. "Once more to the breach."

The end of this transformation brought me to serenity, and serenity turned into compassion for the girls, and cool anger. *I'll endure this degradation for them and bust the criminal governor all to Hell. I'll bring him down from the inside.*

Yeah. All my resolution and courage melted when the lock flipped and the door opened. So much for being a hero. I ran to the bathroom, and its lock spun uselessly.

"Where *are* yooou, Carlson!" a treble voice called.

Embarrassed at my cowardice, I emerged from the bathroom. *Oh, great. The client is a woman carrying a largish bag. This is creepier than ever!* She was dressed in an evening gown like the one around my waist. She was even wearing blue diamond earrings and a pendant. The ones the beautician showed me? Holy cow. With her were two goons wearing navy seersucker suits, one suit way too big and the other way

too small. Both of the men sported shaggy beards, and they fidgeted in their shiny, matching brown and white Oxford shoes.

Despite my racing heart, I laughed.

The woman, however, was lovely and looked perfectly comfortable. "You're cute, but please put the dress on," she requested, and then smiled in a way incongruous with anything I imagined. Creep-y.

I felt an overwhelming impulse to obey her, but caught myself. "I've already made this decision."

"Mother said you knew your own mind. Then, wear these," and she pulled shorts and a camo hoodie from her bag. "We're leaving. You can't traipse around the U Hotel lobby in a bikini." Then she smiled again in her kind, totally weird way.

"I'm not going anywhere with you, a-hole."

"I don't have time to waste, feral spirit. My flight back to Albuquerque leaves at 11:05. Okay, Shady Grove, bring it in."

Shady Grove—one of the glassy-eyed bearded men—stepped into the hallway and returned wheeling a brand new, ultra high-end mountain bicycle, my own helmet dangling from the handlebar.

"Your grandmother said you'd need these. I'm Duncan's mom. I can mesmerize enough people to get us in and out, but no one knows who I am. *You*, girl, will be recognized from a distance, and I can't reach people unless they're nearby, within forty feet or so. The effect lasts five to ten minutes, but for those who stay with me for extended periods, it never wears off." Here she punched the other bearded guy really hard in the shoulder. (He didn't even flinch.) "You're on your own, Carlson. Look for the red rental van double parked in front of the hotel."

I grinned and pulled on the hoodie and shorts.

We sidled past a real goon wearing a perfectly fitted suit and a drool-slimed tie. "Now, handsome," Duncan's mom, my aunt, said, "go soak your head in a toilet." He shambled off to obey, his brain under her influence functioning no better than scrambled eggs.

She and her escorts waited at the elevator. The elevator dinged, its door opened, and a dapper little man stepped out, followed by another mindless hulk. Did everyone around here bring apes for bodyguards?

"Put your watches, rings, and wallets in the bag," she said sweetly to the men from the elevator.

"Cheers!" Duncan's mom waved to me as the door was closing. "Good luck. Say hello to my kid for me. To Duncan."

I snapped on the helmet and threw my leg over the bike. The weight and balance felt off. I looked past the two men who stood like statues with their mouths open and saw the stairwell's sign. Twenty stories up. Fun. I wheeled toward the men and realized the little guy

was probably my client. I could, I should, run him right over. Would be easy. With his brain addled, he wouldn't move. I stood on the pedals to gain power and aimed right at him. But at the last moment, conscience kicked in and I dismounted to walk by. He leered, and his eyes tracked me as I passed. At the last moment, *he* leaned out and patted my fanny, the turd. I didn't even look back, even though he howled as he lost balance and hit the floor.

The dapper man's bodyguard must have regained what dim consciousness he had, because he shouted, "She's loose!"

The first turn in the stairwell gave me trouble, or the new bike did, because I scraped the wall and nearly flipped. After that, no problem. I bumped down the entire spiraling way, only dismounting to walk through a couple fire doors including the one at the bottom that opened into a main hallway crowded with glittering people. I sprinted through, with them screaming and leaping out of the way. A parking valet waved his hand to trigger the front door to open. As I rode by I noticed he was wearing protective headphones. Earmuff Guy! He tipped his cap. Outside, a red van waited in the middle of the lane, its back doors wide open. I jumped the bike inside. Earmuff crawled in afterwards and pulled the doors shut.

We accelerated, and I looked around.

Here they were, my closest family! All of them. Duncan, Grandma, Uncle Al, Uncle Sharp, Irina, and even Jonathan T. Barron. They were smiling, laughing, and trying to hug me. Duncan snuffled over my hoodie like a lost and found puppy.

I burst into tears.

When I stopped crying at last, Duncan said, "It worked."

"What worked?"

"Cousin Ralph. Earmuff Guy? I figured if there was an important message for him, all I had to do was broadcast a repetitive sound."

"Oh. Gurgling mud pots?"

"Grits. I took a cordless mic and turned up the heat."

"But it didn't work. They stole my bike."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

Even in the flashing, irregular illumination of passing headlights I could see something wrong with Duncan, so I asked, "Your forehead?"

"Bruise. My usual clumsiness. Doesn't hurt. I'm sad because I can smell my mom on you. It's the closest I've been to her since she left. She's older, I know, but she hasn't changed."

Grandma had chartered a private jet and a pilot for the hop to and from Atlanta and had got permission through Duncan's dad to use the Beaufort Marine airbase, so they could move faster and get me home quicker. At the Atlanta hangar, everyone said again how glad they were

that I was okay, and lined up for more hugs. Everyone but Duncan, and Cousin Earmuff, who wouldn't let anyone touch him. He twirled in a corner wearing his valet hat and bearing a mischievous smile.

JTB waited until everyone was done. "I'm sorry you went through this," he said.

"I knew *someone* would save me."

"Yesterday I gave you the impression that I'd help. I didn't lie, but I hoped I could be excused. But after today… After today, I'm completely in. Cousin Ralph and the eerie mosquito attack really impressed me, but your issue is far more important. I know I can make a difference."

I tried not to get lost in his eyes.

"Your Uncle Al should research if the Governor is using the foster care system as a farm program for sex slaves."

"Oh dear. I'm positive he is."

"I'm flying back home to California tonight. But I promise to drop everything and join you the instant your plan starts moving, whatever it is."

Once I nestled into a bed they made for me on the jet, I fell asleep and didn't fully wake up until morning and found myself in my own blessed room.

~

Who said the wheels of justice grind slowly?

The new bike was better than mine. I mean, it featured better components, but it didn't ride the same. I wasn't sure I could perform impossible stunts like I did with mine. My old bike and I had so much history, and I didn't trust the new one.

Anyway, we were afraid the kidnapping syndicate would attack us again. We looked at the files of missing women in the region. So many girls had been in foster care when they disappeared. And I figured the number 34 on the blue note was how many girls the Governor currently held in captivity.

Grandma guessed we would be okay, but it didn't stop us from watching over our shoulders. I think Duncan's dad was watching over us, too. Even so, shadows felt deeper and more ominous. The situation improved after Uncle Sharp paid us a visit, and Duncan sniffed out an unconscious goon in our shrubbery, a horseshoe nearby. The stalker was lucky not to be strangled by a ringer.

A month later Uncle Al finally put together a kind-of plan. Al is a master logician, and he had been studying the lottery long before Grandma won her money. On a closer examination, he found that Governor Cobb introduced a political media blitz—TV, radio, mailers in our box—after every lottery jackpot. Every one. Also, the Governor

received a flush of donations *after* the jackpot award and *before* the campaign. Studying the Governor's published itinerary, Al didn't see any corresponding increase of fundraising activity. No particular increase of events and few personal appearances. And most of the events he did throw were fake. That is, no crowds and no VIP guests.

"The conclusion is obvious," Uncle Al said. "But how to prove it?"

"Have Irina win the lottery," JTB suggested by phone.

It was easy enough. Grandma never questioned us for being inquisitive. I waited until bedtime when she needed help getting ready.

"Grandma?"

"Yes, sweetie."

"If you bought a ticket for the next Powerball lottery, what would you pick?"

"How many numbers, dear?"

"Go for broke."

"I don't know. I'm tired, but I'd say…" She closed her eyes. "14, 52, 35, 34, 9. Let's see… The red ball: 20."

I jotted them down and repeated them back.

"That's it. Is Mr. Jonathan T. Barron being helpful?"

"He'll be here next week."

"It will all work out, sweetie."

I gave a covert look, but she just snuggled into her pillow.

"Good night Grandma." I gave her my hand, which she kissed.

"Good night, dear."

So, Irina bought the ticket and won the huge jackpot, though she'd have to split it with another winner. She signed to take it in one lump sum, and Uncle Al said he'd handle the tax forms. The check was soon ready in Columbia, the capital.

~

We assured ourselves of the danger one morning as we waited at Irina's new Fripp Island villa overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, we being Irina, and me, too, as a chaperone to keep her company, Duncan, and JTB, who was watching from the balcony. It was the middle of summer vacation by then. We had been at the villa for a week, and I risked riding every day along the beach and into the waves on the new bicycle.

We were waiting for Governor Cobb's presidential "committee" to show up. They'd arrive anytime, maybe.

Duncan was outside somewhere smelling the morning breezes. JTB stepped in from the balcony. The wind whipped the curtains of the sliding glass door.

I peeked out as a glorious peloton of pelicans floated overhead.

"The waves are high," JTB said. "Nice surf. Someone with binoculars was observing me. They don't seem to be hiding. That's good. I

don't believe they know about the Governor's lottery business."

"We don't know, either," Irina said.

Just then Duncan came rushing in. "They're here."

"Who?" I said.

He stuffed a pistol under a couch pillow.

A forever minute later I answered the door. Suits, two of them, one grey and the other black were standing at the villa's entrance. They both were sweating.

The grey suit contained a black man whose expression said he wouldn't do the talking. The black suit came with black shirt, black tie, and a black cowboy hat carried in his hand. His soft hair combed into a gentle wave made an instant impression, but it was blacker than nature and couldn't misdirect from the worn, tanned face. The only life in this person showed in his darting eyes, and then his mouth.

"Good morning. My name is Whitmire, and I'm an attorney for the South Carolina Education Lottery. We'd like to see Ms. Irina Grigorenko. May we come in?"

How could we say no?

When everyone settled into chairs, JTB, who was wearing dark glasses, said, "I speak for Miss Grigorenko. You're here to request a donation for the Governor's presidential campaign. Miss Grigorenko has received many inquiries since she came into money, and I regret that she's turning them all down. This is an exciting time for her and she wants to take things slowly."

Whitmire looked shocked. "I *said* we're with the Lottery. Who are you?"

They didn't know who JTB was. Excellent.

"Someone who has her *best* interest in mind."

"I see," the man said in a singsong tone, not attempting to conceal his mockery. "Is this the lady?" he asked, nodding to Irina and not to me.

At this point the black man edged around the room and inspected everything as if he was searching for cameras and recording devices.

Duncan was sniffing and staring around blankly. He had misplaced his glasses.

"What's wrong with him?" Whitmire said.

"He's blind," I said.

"You're all very nervous," he said, looking around our circle. "You should be. Ms. Grigorenko is in an uncomfortable position. Those shadowy men lurking on the beach and in the parking lot? Your bodyguards?"

"No," JTB said.

"Ms. Grigorenko is in the U.S. illegally. The country has every

right to deport her. If she were from Mexico, perhaps there wouldn't be an issue, but as is, she's in danger of being deported back to Russia. I understand that her relatives returned there? I must say, Ms. Grigorenko's illegal status puts her substantial Education Lottery winnings in jeopardy.

"The Governor has spoken personally about her situation, and he can help. We will advocate on Ms. Grigorenko's behalf to ensure she remains in the U.S., if she wishes. We can also reserve $20,000 cash for her, and grant her a full scholarship to any one of the South Carolina state universities."

"And what's the deal? What does she do in return?"

"Nothing."

"What about her lottery winnings?"

"She signs a paper releasing the winnings. We avoid an expensive, expensive for you, I might say, court proceeding."

"What happens to the funds?"

"They become available for other purposes."

"You have a contract?"

He handed JTB a sheet of paper.

"This says nothing about a scholarship."

"You're skeptical. If you wish, we'll also cover the cost of your nice villa."

Here JTB stood up and pulled open the curtains, letting the glaring morning sunlight pour through. "You're not with the Education Lottery, Mr. Whitmire. You work for the Governor's presidential campaign. If Miss Grigorenko agrees with your terms, I have no doubt you will honor your pathetic offer, but I know that the lottery money will be disbursed to dozens if not hundreds of people, who will, in turn, make perfectly legal donations to the Governor's campaign."

JTB stopped to wait for a reaction. The minuscule hesitation on the part of Mr. Whitmire was all we needed to see. I'm sure Duncan smelled a change in Whitmire's chemistry. Heck, I could smell it. Whitmire started flibber-flabbering, but JTB didn't let him reach coherency.

"My name is Jonathan T. Barron and I produce a radio show called Strange Days Radio. Ordinarily, I broadcast stories on the paranormal, the weird, the improbable. I'm more of debunker than believer, and Mr. Whitmire, you're debunked. This room is bugged better than the CIA can do it. It's my trade, sir. And though this story has nothing to do with the supernatural (here I cleared my throat), it is the oddest corruption I have ever seen. People will care."

JTB waited for another reaction. Whitmire only glanced to his partner who was staring at his phone, checking JTB's credentials, no

doubt. JTB took off his sunglasses. The partner glanced up and nodded.

"You can't prove anything," Whitmire said.

"I can speculate. It goes a long way in politics."

Whitmire was silent, thinking.

"You're an intelligent man, Mr. Whitmire. You haven't threatened to sue me for slander. I respect you for respecting me. But let me tell you something you don't know. Those men you thought were Miss Grigorenko's guards? They're her tormentors."

By the end of Irina's softly narrated tale of her abduction and our boisterous team presentation proving Governor Cobb being the hub of a sinister sex trafficking syndicate, Whitmire and his silent partner were shaking in anger. They said, and I could tell that Duncan, the human lie detector, believed them when they said, that they hadn't known anything about it. The black guy even spoke, saying. "This is horrible."

I forgave them for their bad costume colors.

When they were leaving, Whitmire said, "I'm not guaranteeing anything, but we'll see about these unthinkable crimes. As for our shakedown, you do what you think best. Ms. Grigorenko has nothing to worry about from us. She won the lottery, and her immigration status doesn't affect this whatsoever. We're at your mercy."

A week later Governor Cobb withdrew from the presidential race, stating the classic he "needed to spend more time with family." He didn't even endorse anyone.

We also read that a Mr. Whitmire of the Governor's staff had been murdered by unknown persons. Too bad, really. I felt bad for him—for a political crook he seemed to have a smidgen of ethics. We had played one crook against another, but as far as we could tell, the sex trafficking continued unaffected. Uncle Al said that kidnappings of young girls seemed to be picking up, and we were feeling desperate, especially Duncan. We stood ready. When and if it was right to move, things would happen fast.

~

It was now nearly the end of summer vacation. Duncan had been staying with his dad and volunteering at the hospital. One Sunday he rode over to Grandma's. I met him at the front door. He dumped his bike on the lawn and grinned while bouncing up and down with excitement. "Uncle Al said we never did confirm the Governor was running a kidnapping ring and selling girls."

"But Grandma said."

"Not everyone believes her. So, Dad did his own surveillance. Satellite imagery."

"And?"

"We're raiding the Governor's compound. We're going to stop this

shit. Yeah."

"Who is we?"

"Marines. A Special Operations Team."

"You mean like Navy SEALS?"

"Some guys are here from Camp Lejeune on a training operation, and dad and Mr. Barron persuaded the commanding general to give them a live exercise. In their free time."

"Mr. Barron did?"

"The President okayed the mission. Apparently, they all know each other from Afghanistan. Mr. Barron was involved in some fantastical op no one will discuss. The subject has its own smell. It's how he started his paranormal investigations."

"Cool."

"And you know that jump you've always dreamed about?"

"Yeah?"

"I can smuggle you onboard the plane, but you'll have to wear a parachute. I insist."

~

That's how I found myself stuffed into an airplane compartment and hugging an expensive, folding, carbon-fiber bike in its aerodynamic fabric case. Grandma would never give permission, so this was my only chance until I turned 18, and since it was for a good cause, I thought I'd give it a try. I have to admit, I was nervous. The danger was darkness. But I figured the Governor's house was lit well enough that I would find my landing site, a long, grassy slope ending at the water's edge.

I was wearing a radio headset that Duncan gave me. I turned down the Marines' chatter. The noise, vibration, and bounce of the aircraft was relaxing. We had to circle upward from a distance to get the right altitude, Duncan had said. I wondered what kind of commitment he had made to talk his dad into this operation. Probably going peaceably to military school. Too bad. Duncan would fail in a rigid environment. Or, he'd be bullied because of his ability.

I didn't think of it often, but in those minutes of waiting, I wondered where our abilities came from. I mean, my skill. Lots of guys have amazing talent on a bike, but mine wasn't natural, was it?

Maybe Duncan's powers of smell were natural, but how? Genetic mutation. But Grandma's infallible guesswork? Maybe she had simply tuned into what was available to everyone. JTB had been telling me the other day about how some trees are interconnected underground. Say, if one tree is attacked by a pest, such as an insect, that tree will produce a toxin to make its sap and leaves unpalatable. But the thing is, the other nearby trees of that species will produce the same toxin, even if not

attacked. Maybe the world is like that. We humans might have an underground invisible connection to reality ready to be tapped if only we're paying attention.

I had asked Uncle Al this question once. He said that with all the bad luck in the world, there must be good luck somewhere to even the balance. Our family just happens to be the "locus" of concentrated good luck. He called it blessings. I sure hoped my luck would hold out for this jump.

My ears popped and the background chatter took a new note. I turned up the volume. The jump door had been thrown open.

"60 seconds," I heard. My cue.

I pushed open the closet and stretched my legs. The bike package was strapped to my front. Peeking around, I saw no one looking in my direction. I slowly stood, pulling myself up. I timed it just right. I waddled to the door. At the ten second count, I launched.

"What was that?" a voice asked.

"A girl."

"You're kidding."

"Go, go, go, go."

Then there were several seconds of deep breaths, grunts, and quick prayers. The Marines were behind me. Or I should say, above me.

"Was she wearing a parachute?" the first voice asked with some unease.

Better than a parachute, I thought. A Flying Squirrel brand wingsuit.

Once I had cleared the aircraft, it took a few seconds of tumbling to figure out how to glide. The bike pack made it hard. At least the ocean gave me an orientation. The view was spectacular. Bright stars in the heavens and muted stars below. I had studied night-time satellite images and thought I would see my target, but I was lost. I had no idea where I was. I was feeling panic. I switched radio channels and heard Duncan say, "Did you wear a parachute, stupid?"

"Listen, I've got more important things to think about."

"An altimeter?"

"No altimeter."

"Alright. I'm with Beta Team at our mobile base. We are poised to enter the Governor's compound. I've got you on sonar and infrared. Bear north until I say when, and begin spiraling. That will bring you closer to the house. I'll provide you a running altitude."

Duncan gave me readouts until he said, "You have 35 seconds for chute deployment. I pray you're wearing one."

At least I had practiced unfolding the bike, which took 12 seconds in my room. But falling through the air, it took more strength and focus

than I knew I had to get that bike into rideable configuration.

Worse, I couldn't see a thing below, and the Governor's house and his grassy slope were too far away.

Duncan at this point was screaming, "Deploy your chute! Deploy your chute! You can't land the bike!"

Duncan was right. A patch of trees was in front of me now. Even with a chute, my landing would be a challenge. Reluctantly, I pulled the cord, jerked back, lifted over the trees, and mercifully saw the pale grey of a field. My tires were about 10 feet from the ground when the chute caught a tree. I cut it loose and slammed into the ground. The bike squirreled, but I stayed up until a wheelbarrow-sized rock loomed ahead. I swerved and toppled sideways and then the world was a rolling, skidding chaos. When at last I came to a halt, I lay still for a minute. Miraculously everything checked out. My radio was quiet, though. Not broken, but out of range, I guess. I wobbled up to my feet and looked at the bike with my headlamp. It was intact, but there was something I had never seen before. Made me proud.

A hound dog was sitting nearby watching me with curiosity.

I had to tell somebody. "Hey fella," I said showing him the bike, "my very first scratch." Was he impressed? He whimpered, shook his ears, and trotted away.

Best of all, of course, was that I had the whole jump on my infrared MoJoe.

I stripped the wingsuit and stuffed it into the bike bag, then wheeled up an incline until I could see the Governor's house on a rise a mile north.

I was way off target. I sighed.

Why did I come anyway? Was it just for the jump? Even if I had landed on the grassy slope, I really had had no plan. Was I going to show off and dodge bullets again like last time? What good had that done? Duncan had used his brain and figured out a way to rescue Irina, while I had been only a side show.

I noticed a lighter band to my left and found it was a gravel road. Too depressed to ride, I walked along, the hound dog with me once more.

Eventually, I came to the iron perimeter fence and could see the house again, popping and flickering like someone was shooting off firecrackers, but no doubt it was firearms and flash-bangs. Marine Special Forces giving them Hell. Literally. A blaze burned near the water—the Governor's yacht.

The road continued along the fence and ended at a stumpy brick building, brick similar to that of the Governor's house and with a wide garage door. I couldn't see a way to cross the fence, bike or no bike, the

jump between roof and fence too far.

Just then my phone rang. Duncan's voice. "Carlson?"

"Yep. Useless, but here."

"Thank God. Somewhere on Earth, I assume."

"Yep. I'm not dead. Due south of the house. Missed the landing zone."

"Obvious. We're done here. The sex traffickers are dead or captured. Mostly dead, I'm afraid. We can't find the Governor, however. Can you ride? You want someone to pick you up?"

"That'd be nice. I've got more bruises than I thought."

"We've got you located. It will be awhile, 'cause that gravel road… Someone's checking a map for me. It doesn't go anywhere. But we'll find you."

"Should I ride out the road and meet you?"

"If you want. I have to go."

I climbed onto the bike and rode a few yards, but I was pretty stiff, so I got off and walked.

My doggy friend stayed behind at the brick building. He whined and scratched at the door. Lights flashed on. A motion detector. The garage door creaked and rattled open. Headlights streamed out and lit the trees ahead, and from the door crept a black SUV. And yes, it still had a large dent in the roof.

There must be a tunnel from the house to the garage.

The SUV's tires spun in the gravel as the vehicle gained speed, and I realized there might be one final, impossible, daring bike trick left for me to perform. One I had never thought of before. One harder than jumping from an airplane. And it was the purpose for me so badly missing the target. Maybe it was why I was born and brought into my family.

The Governor's presidential campaign was over. Good. His sex trafficking career was over. Good. But he would find a way to stay free. He was still in office. He would avoid punishment and cook up some new corruption. Or maybe he was fleeing the country to escape justice. But I could prevent him.

The car approached, accelerating. The driver was leaning forward, his nose almost touching the steering wheel. I had never laid eyes on him before, but I recognized his face from the many posters I'd seen. It *was* the Governor, pale and grim, illuminated by the light of his console. I timed it perfectly. My MoJoe was rolling in high definition. I felt weak and dizzy, but as with all my stunts I smothered my fear and rode on, right into his path and held up my hand. The pup trotted near and began barking a frantic warning.

The Governor could have stopped in time. I hoped he would, but if

we judged his character correctly… he sped up. He was right there, looming before me. The metal grill of the vehicle.

You asked for it, buddy, was my last thought…

~

My memory of being run over and what the Governor shouted near the wreck of my body is fuzzy. As is the transport to the hospital. I heard a barking dog… When I came into full consciousness, Duncan and Irina were beside me. Duncan grinning and Irina teary.

JTB came in and asked if I wanted to do his radio program from my hospital bed.

"The Governor?" I whispered.

"In jail. Hit and run. Attempted murder. Assault with a deadly weapon. They won't let him bond out. He's a flight risk. It's big news."

"Then, where's my microphone?"

~

I really wasn't up to it so soon. Doctors said I was lucky to be alive, and with my damaged spine it was unlikely I would walk again let alone ride a bike. Little did they know riding was easier for me than walking. But it took a whole week for me to stabilize. At least one member of our gang sat with me around the clock.

Grandma came every day. I lamented to her that my *supernatural* ability on the bicycle had not covered deliberately peddling in front of a speeding SUV.

"You're wrong dear," she said. "Anyone else would be plain dead. He ran you right over. Thumpity, thump, thump. Instinctively you placed yourself so that the SUV missed your head and vital organs. Your bike punctured the Governor's oil pan and he ruined his engine. That's how we caught him."

"How about the pup? What happened to him?"

"He stayed by you the whole time, keeping guard. He was a stray, I guess, and we brought him home."

"Can we keep him, Grandma?"

"I don't see why not."

JTB was patient. As soon as I was able, they moved me to Grandma's house, where she had kitted out my room with hospital gear, and she hired nurses. I have a big room, so it was easy to bring in chairs, tables, and the audio equipment. Irina helped me dress and put on a little eyeliner. JTB's program goes live every Saturday night, barring national and regional emergencies, so it was pretty exciting. The lights were turned down low and we had spectators in chairs shoved along one wall. Only family and Ergo. That's what I named the pup. I wanted to invite a couple intelligent, non-arrogant guys from school, but JTB nixed that. "Save your family secret for Mr. Right," he said.

JTB produced a transcript of the program, so it's easier just to quote from it and then add commentary, if I think it's important.

> **JTB**: Welcome to Strange Days Radio. I'm Jonathan T. Barron, and we are broadcasting from a secret location near Beaufort, South Carolina where no doubt you've heard the news. Governor Andrew Cobb has been arrested and is now in jail for allegedly running over a teenage girl in his SUV and then fleeing the scene. As you likely know, Governor Cobb recently dropped his candidacy for President of the United States. There's been a lot of speculation from both the left and the right of the political spectrum about what's happening behind the scenes.
>
> Well, we will add fuel to the fires. Because tonight, from her hospital bed, we have the girl who was run over. What was she doing riding a bicycle on that isolated gravel road near the Governor's summer home? She will tell you herself, after these messages from our sponsors.

The introduction was awkward, true. I mean, how could I explain me being there in the middle of the night? But JTB had told us we should attack the issue head on and tell as much truth as could be believed.

When JTB came back, he said, "Okay. I begin with a disclaimer. If Governor Cobb is convicted of hit and run, attempted murder and so on, he'll be spending a lot of time in jail. Likely his political career is over. His lawyers may think that what we are about to tell you gives them a case for impeaching my guests' characters. They may think they have a case for slander against me and my guests. I dare them. Try it. Just try it. We have the evidence on video. Our story is real. At their request, and to protect their privacy, we're not using our guests' actual names. They are not publicity hounds. All they want is for right to be done. As for our listeners, all I can say is, believe it or not.

"We will call our first guest, 'Marie.'"

So, I explained that I had jumped from a plane with some military guys whose mission was to shut down the Governor's sex trafficking. I didn't say they were Marines. I didn't say anything about my bike riding stunts. JTB guided me with questions. I told everything I saw and heard. Then JTB asked me the dreaded question.

"I know this is personal, Marie and it's an uncomfortable issue. But why did you join this mission? Why did you make the jump?"

I paused a long time, a couple seconds of dead air being a long time on radio. I finally said, "What really matters is the girls who were

enslaved and this evil man that so many people trusted. I wanted to help. I'm lucky that I have people who care for me. Friends and relatives who protect me. Not everyone has this. I had to do something."

"You did help, didn't you?"

I nodded.

JTB affirmed as much to the radio audience. "And it cost her. She's lost the use of her legs. You can't see her, but Marie has tears in her eyes. She lost a lot already. I think it's okay to tell you her parents both died less than a year ago. When we come back, we'll talk with another girl who was abducted by the Governor's sex trafficking thugs, and who was rescued by none other than Marie's cousin, a young man who is a human bloodhound."

We broke for another round of commercials, then Irina, as "Iris," told her whole story again, including the scene with Whitmire, then Uncle Al as "Abel" succinctly filled in the details of the lottery scandal.

Last was Duncan. He was going by the name "Dennis." He touched on his role in tracking Irina when she was first kidnapped and how he called a taxi to rescue her.

Here's more transcript:

JTB: You have an extraordinary sense of smell.

DENNIS: Yes, sir.

JTB: How extraordinary?

DENNIS: I've been tested. The creature with the best sense of smell is probably a male moth, but it can best detect only a female moth pheromone. Next would be a bear, probably the grizzly, which can smell better than a bloodhound. My ability to identify scent is probably 100 times greater than a grizzly bear. For example, I can tell what brand of cigar you smoked. I can smell the proximity of a wall by the gassing of its paint. I know how long ago the wall was painted. You see, I can also smell across time. For example, this microphone was used by a… a conifer tree? I know that in this room… [Pause. Takes a deep breath through his nose.] There's a woman three weeks pregnant.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Squeal.] I didn't know! It must be me! We've been trying for a year!

DENNIS: She tried only an hour ago.

MARIE: Duncan!

JTB: Umm. Okay. I must remind my guests this is a family program. So, Dennis, tell the scene in the Governor's house, of how you used your powers of smell.

DENNIS: Yes, sir. I didn't parachute in with Marie and Team Alpha, but I entered with the second team on the downwind side of the estate. Five men, and me. We climbed over the fence with a titanium

ladder. I helped locate any hostiles who were outside. When we were sure the grounds were secure, Team Alpha cleared the known rooms. My job then was to find the hidden rooms. This took time, but not as long as you'd expect. I jogged through the mansion and located the secret doors and tunnels. Once these had been breached, team members stepped back and let me check the air. In most cases no one fired on us. I could tell how big a room was and who was in it, if anyone. And what their intentions were, even in dark. So, we found a dormitory full of girls, 30 of them chained to their beds. Two guys with guns were guarding them. One of them dropped his gun. The other didn't and we shot him dead.

JTB: Was that hard?

DENNIS: I was armed, too, you know. I can shoot.

JTB: Really?

DENNIS: Yes, sir.

JTB: There's something else special about you, isn't there? Something besides your superhero powers of smell. Would you tell us about it?

DENNIS: It's not a big deal.

JTB: Do you mind if I tell?

DENNIS: No, sir. My friends and relatives all know.

JTB: This young man is blind. Totally blind. He wears thick glasses to conceal the fact. How do you get around? I mean, you seem in all respects to be a sighted person.

DENNIS: Doctors believe that as I was developing inside my mother, somehow a wire split in my brain. The part of my brain that processes visuals connected to my olfactory system. So my eyes are normal, it's just they never were hooked up. Then, my olfactory epithelium is also considerably more densely innervated than the average person. So, that sort of explains it.

JTB: Sort of?

DENNIS: Some of it isn't explainable. I should have a really long snout.

JTB: You do have a big nose, if I may say.

DENNIS: [Laughs] I can't see it. And I can't smell it either.

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

DENNIS: I usually get around okay by smell, and I also have sonar implants, but even those aren't perfect. I bump into things.

JTB: What does the future hold for you?

DENNIS: I want to go to medical school so I can learn to diagnose disease. My father wants me to join Special Forces so I can help on ops like this more often. He's pretty happy with how things turned out, and it was fun. We'll see. Maybe I'll do both.

JTB: Amazing. That wraps up our program. Strange Days Radio. Tune in next week when we interview some of the girls rescued during this daring raid on the summer home of Governor Cobb, former Governor Cobb, of South Carolina.

DENNIS: You have a thyroid condition.

JTB: What?

DENNIS: Your thyroid isn't producing enough T4, and your TSH levels aren't keeping up. Do you feel tired all the time?

Though it wasn't planned, the engineer let that last spontaneous banter go over the air and conclude the program. JTB thought it brilliant.

I was tired, so people left the room quickly. They dismantled and removed all the equipment the next day. By afternoon when my room was back to normal, Grandma came in and sat by my bed.

"I'm proud of you, Carlson, dear."

"Grandma?"

"What is it, sweetie?"

"I don't want to be Carlson anymore. I want to wear lovely dresses once in awhile. I'm ready for a new life. I want to go by my middle name."

"Marie?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I thought it was funny you picked it for the radio. I went through a transition like you did when I was your age. Or a little older."

"How?"

"I was a smart-ass know-it-all, until I met your grandfather."

I gave her a funny look.

"Our family is odd isn't it?"

"No, ma'am. Not really."

"But we do have secrets."

"Doesn't everyone?" My secret wasn't spectacular or anything. Grandma looked at me like she expected me to tell her, and I didn't want to disappoint, so I said, "I've always known I was adopted. I'm not really a member of the family."

"Oh, yes you are."

"I know what you mean, but because I'm adopted, my bike riding isn't supernatural, like you guys are. Like Duncan. It's just me. I'm the best mountain biker in the world. Was, I mean." I took a deep breath and let loose a huge sigh.

"I have a secret to share with you, dear."

I didn't say anything.

"I don't guess at things. I really know them. I don't want people to

know I know, so I pretend. I can't explain why, or how, but it just is. I don't try to understand, but I try to be wise with this knowledge, and humble. Your Grandpa Middleton and I were poor, but we were happy. Grandpa needed to be head of the house—to have the final say on our decisions. I loved him and let him be who he was. And I also knew he wouldn't be with us forever. Those years with our children, your father a baby growing into a boy growing into a man, were filled with fun. It was hard, but oh, so worthwhile. And when Grandpa died, I knew I needed to use my gift for our family, and that's when I bought a lottery ticket.

"And I knew, Marie, the date your parents would die. I always cautioned them about riding motorcycles, but I couldn't say more. I don't caution you. Maybe you've noticed. There's a reason. We didn't tell you about being adopted because we wanted you to be confident. You always took smart, calculated risks and challenged your abilities. You needed to jump from the airplane and ride into the path of that SUV. You needed to risk losing your life."

"I suppose."

"It's not over, dear. I haven't told you yet, but I've opened the house as a safe haven for the girls you all rescued. They'll stay until they're ready to resume their lives or begin new ones. A transition home. Several returned to their families already. But this crime is worldwide, and we'll be hosting girls from everywhere, Asia, Europe, Africa, South America. All over. I've hired Irina to direct the program."

"She'll do great. Duncan will love having her around. And maybe it's something I can get involved in, too."

Grandma only smiled, and I knew why she did. All of those vague smiles through the years. She couldn't say what she knew.

But I was mistaken about her smile today. My door opened and in came Duncan, Irina, and JTB. As they stood back, Irina put her arm around Duncan's shoulders like a big sister, and girls entered the room one or two at a time. Some even my age. They were happy, sad, and each one beautiful in her own way. They thanked me simply and left.

Then Duncan's father entered wearing his steam-pressed uniform. He and Irina traded friendly glances. It's a start. Then some of the Special Forces entered wearing casual clothes. Normal manly guys made of steel, not only physically, but in their core. They really cared.

One of them said, "When you're old enough, Marie, please sign up for Marine Corps Special Forces. You'll be the first girl. I'd love you on our team." He took my hand.

I told him to be careful what he asked for.

At the end of the line of Marines was my cousin Duncan. He said he'd ride on my handlebars again any day. I'll not reveal if I cried.

To wrap this story up, I'll say that Duncan began checking on my condition and gave the doctors valuable information so that I could heal quicker. It didn't hurt that he kicked butt to keep them thinking about my case. The blind boy who could sniff out all their skeletons and who had gone into combat was more than intimidating.

And I actually began to feel my legs.

Who knows if I will ever ride again? Well, Grandma knows, but she'll never tell. I have the videos of my incredible flying squirrel suit/mountain bike landing and the awesome getting-run-over-by-an-SUV trick, and they're up at YouTube and other places, and still garnering millions of views, but that's past. I have to live in the present and meet its challenges, whatever they are.

Hey, but picture me doing amazing, impossible stunts in a wheelchair. Even better, racing down waterfalls on one of those arm-powered bicycles. I'm sure Grandma Middleton will get me one someday.

END

Homesick

Thunder rumbled again from the southwest.

The broad, two story house with its warm porch light might welcome him. But if a runaway had knocked on *his* front door long after midnight, his dad would greet the unlucky boy with a shotgun. So, Raiden turned around. Better to be harmless. Better for a gun to be pointed at his back.

The door opened behind him, and Raiden expected at least a suspicion-laden question. Instead he heard a sigh. A plump, grey-haired woman in a loose, white nightgown stood there, her face turned down to the side.

"Hello ma'am. May I stay in your barn tonight? Me and my horse, Jasper. He's tied to your paddock back there."

She unfolded glasses and slid them over her nose, but she still avoided eye contact. Silence stretched on long enough that Raiden thought he should leave, so when she asked, "What's your name?" he jumped a little.

He told her. She gave no sign, but backed out of the way. He didn't know what else to do but step inside. The front room glowed golden from one table lamp and smelled of rose water. It was tidy and clean, but stacked full of knickknack curiosities like a Cracker Barrel store.

A rough voice at the top of the staircase said, "Who is it?"

"Raiden Hancock," she said weakly, as if she had lost hope of being heard.

The man leaned on the handrail as he crept down the stairs. He straightened at the bottom, flicked on an overhead light, and looked Raiden over. "What's the problem?"

"I just need—" Raiden began, but the woman broke in.

"He asked if he could stay the night in an empty bedroom," she said. "It's going to rain. Can he keep his horse in a stall?"

Raiden wondered if she told a lie on purpose.

The man wiped his hand over his whole face, top to bottom. "How old are you? Sixteen, seventeen?"

"I'm fifteen."

"Why are you out like this?"

Raiden wouldn't answer.

"Listen, I'm calling the sheriff. Your parents will worry. Where you from?"

"I ran away from home."

"Why?" the woman asked.

The man glared at her. "Does it matter? Sometimes your kindness

is annoying."

"The why is, my dad planned to ship me to military school because I wouldn't help slaughter the pigs. He already bought me a bus ticket."

"I see," the man said, not committing himself either way.

The woman took the man's hand, raised it to her lips, and gave it a soft kiss.

He had not resisted any, but stared in sudden shock. "Come with me, please," he said and gestured to a side room, a sitting room. She went in, and the man started after her, but came back. "My name's Harold. And she's my wife, Norma Jean. She's a nice lady, but… she has problems. I hope you understand. Want something to drink? A soda? Glass of milk?"

Raiden shook his head no.

"Okay." He pointed to where Raiden was standing. "Don't go anywhere." He slid the door closed.

Harold did the talking. Maybe he did all the talking. All Raiden heard was his voice and periods of silence.

He wandered around the front room. A vase of pink and yellow roses on the mantle piece reflected itself in the wide mirror. Photographs in gilt frames covered the walls and the upright piano, many of the pictures containing a young Harold and a blonde, curvy woman wearing tight dresses, like an old-fashioned movie star. Both of them were smiling so hard it must hurt. Her sad eyes reminded him of his own mother's, and he had to shake off missing her already. The photos of horses grabbed his attention, tall fast horses with small men perched on top wearing caps and costumes.

The man droned on and Raiden put his ear to the door.

"We don't know anything about him. He can't stay in the house with us asleep. I won't sleep at all. Your mom's jewelry is in that bedroom. He could steal it, slip out, and we'd never see him again." There was another short spell of silence and then the man said, "How could I forget the miscarriages? They weren't anyone's fault. Not yours, not mine."

Raiden leaned away from the door and heard a sound he had been anticipating: his horse Jasper yelling. Raiden went outside and called to him and then walked to the fence. He stroked the horse's shoulder. Jasper was thirsty and hungry. A tall horse on the inside of the paddock startled him as it stumbled close by in the dim darkness.

The woman came out, leaving the door wide open, and shuffled up to Raiden. "My husband said you could sleep in an extra bedroom, and I'll show you where things are in the barn. But we have to phone your parents in the morning." She avoided looking at him as before, but she'd been crying.

Raiden frowned. “Did he really say I could sleep inside the house? I’d rather stay in the barn with Jasper, if you’ll loan me a sleeping bag.”

She glanced straight at him for the first time and flinched. It lasted only a second, but Raiden knew the look. It was the same his mother had given him when he decided to run away. He hadn’t said a word, and yet his mother knew.

In a mournful dove’s voice Norma Jean said, “If your parents agree, you can live here and work on our property. You can go to the school. We don’t keep pigs.” It seemed like she had more to say; instead, she rocked back and forth, her eyes glazed.

Raiden peered toward the house. Harold was standing in the open doorway, watching them. A strong breeze began thrashing the trees and the first raindrops of the storm dripped down.

She stopped rocking and said, “I don’t want you to leave.”

END

The Greenlandic Windows (jtb 4)

DAY ONE

The elderly woman in the wheelchair near the windows kept talking and talking in an endless, nonsensical monologue.

"What's she saying?" I asked Mr. Peterson, the caretaker, a thin tree of a man planted on a stool beside an antique cash register.

The man shook his head, his tanned, wilted face the saddest I'd ever seen. "My wife of forty years," he said in a Scandinavian accent. "May I help you find something?"

I surveyed the gift shop-museum-kitchen with its single dining table covered with a white lace cloth. The man and his wife were the only people in the room, and apart from them, there was nothing of interest, not the books and postcards, not the ugly, creepy, ivory carvings and jewelry, not the dusty toiletries for the rare guest who forgot to bring them on the yacht from Iceland. "Do you have a local map?"

"A space-traveling vessel."

"Excuse me?" I said.

"It's nonsense, but Simigag talks in Greenlandic about a space vessel. I call her Ane."

He slipped a sheet of paper lined in colored contours onto the counter. "I've marked the trails and ruins. Avoid the cliffs on the north, here. They're dangerous. Stay away." He covered with his finger a band of dense lines at the top of the sheet. "People have plunged 500 meters into the fjord. The Curator, Ms. Jagland says you're a police officer in California, the wife of Jonathan T. Barron, the radio guy."

"Isabel. I *was* a police officer until our wedding last week," I said, folding the map and tucking it into my parka. He made me nervous. I felt like I was confronting a subject involved in petty mischief who smugly knew he'd never be punished. But I didn't want to be a cop anymore.

"Odd place for a… honeymoon," he said. "Are those the right words? Honey and moon? I make a delicious amagergryde, a Danish ham stew, if you want me to cook."

"Thank you." I glanced again toward the woman engaged in a passionate, interminable, one-sided dialogue and opened the door to leave. She cried out and babbled faster and louder. I turned. She was glaring at me, the desperate, meaningless words pouring forth.

"Don't talk to her!" Peterson said, standing almost on top of me now. I recoiled at his proximity.

Annoyed by his imperious command, I walked up to Ane. In the midst of her noise, I asked, "How are you today?"

In the sudden silence that followed, Peterson leaned forward and mouthed, “Don’t talk to her.”

“I’m fine. How are you?” Ane said in crisp English, which was the last thing I expected.

The caretaker sashayed between us, putting his person and me forehead to chin, he blinking down at me from a five-inch advantage, his breath stinking like spoiled fish. I pictured grabbing his skinny wrist, stepping backward, and twisting and forcing him onto the floor. Instead, on my honey and moon, as a *retired* cop, I just stepped backward.

The caretaker moved forward and blew in my face. “You’re disturbing her.”

Proving him right, or proving him a beast, Ane began shrieking.

Once outside the white-trimmed Danish-blue caretaker’s house, I took a deep breath. A flight of a dozen or so white gulls glided overhead, flying south.

After my hike, I’d be sure to tell Jonathan—Jay—about the old lady and her spaceship. I pulled up my hood and worked my hands into gloves. It was early November on the northeastern coast of Greenland, clear sky, calm, mid-day, and the temperature hadn’t climbed much higher than 30 degrees F. Jay called it a heat wave.

He had insisted I take a map along, in case I got lost. Lost? With no trees obstructing the views, and the mountain and the fjord as boundaries and landmarks, a person could only get lost on purpose. Patches of ice and crisp snow in the brown and lichen-green landscape lent the air a nose-pinching feel like a deep freezer, one scented with dried herbs. I walked on and up. Jay had stayed behind with my toddler Scotty to allow me some independent time.

Soon the trail veered left, away from the fjord. Straight ahead on the map were the cliffs, though I couldn’t see them. It seemed safe enough, so I ditched the trail and climbed the steeper ground north. The view opened wider and the ground seemed to end before me. Here at last on the right were cliffs, but unless I was reading the map wrong, not at all where they were shown. Gazing out to the fjord, I breathed in the pure air and the aesthetic starkness of rock, sky, and wide, expansive water flecked with white.

Across the fjord stood a much higher mountain, a pointed spire towering among other jagged peaks. A crack, then a deep rumble boomed across, an invisible icefall somewhere. Better if I moved away from the edge. Behind me and southwest a few hundred meters rose a rock promontory, likely a safer place to rest. Moving on, in this remote, desolate place with only wildness in view, it was exciting to imagine that no human being had ever walked this ground.

My goal was further away than it looked, and by the time I reached it, I was sweating and removed my outer layers. The promontory was a fraud, however, because sloping tundra continued up behind it at a less steep incline. Funny, the map showed it as a sharp peak. I found a comfortable position on a square set of rocks. Far below, 2000 feet below and visible from my vantage point was the caretaker's lodgings and the stone house where we were staying.

The House. You won't find anything about it on the official Greenland tourist website. It's not mentioned in guidebooks, nor in any publications whatsoever, popular or academic. The house is known only to a minute, elite orbit of people around the world, a group called "The Circle" that formed when the house was discovered in 1985.

Jay had been invited because of his sterling work as a paranormal investigator and being the nationally known host of Strange Days Radio. The hope of his sponsors, that is, his fans, with the Circle, was that he would solve the mystery of the house. What it was, exactly. If he answered that question, he'd be released from the confidentiality agreement and could discuss the house on his radio program. While a few guests came as tourists and patrons, most, like Jay, had research skills. The privilege of announcing the existence of the house to the world was the reward for discovering its secret.

A sudden mist-laden breeze rose from the fjord, temporarily concealing the view, and feeling cold, I put my layers back on.

The ordinary opinion was that the house was built by early Icelandic explorers, but the real, scarcely spoken belief was that it was older. At the heart of the house's mystery was its technology. The Circle's curator, Dr. Marie Jagland told us the stone of the house had been drilled to pipe geothermic water for heat, so the house was comfortable during the bitterest winter weather. The windows, the original ones, were a combination of mica and fragments of glass. Most of the windows, however, had been updated with insulated glass, the original panes protected in the vaults of the Smithsonian.

The house was comprised of three levels, the first one half-buried. Each of the walls was trapezoidal and leaning inward. The roof, built with ancient metal trusses and shingled in slate, sloped from north to south in a single sweep.

My body was chilling in the same moments as my heart warmed by thinking about my two loves, my husband and Scotty, who was conceived in a previous momentary relationship. Jay and I had started dating just after an earthquake and a horrible, unbelievable incident in our hometown that threw us together. You'll have to find the podcast of Jay's broadcast about that event and listen to it yourself. My son was the best thing that ever happened to me, a result of my worst mistake…

I tossed several small stones into an ice-lined pool. The last stone in my hand, smooth and cream colored, caught my attention. It wasn't a stone at all, but a piece of bone. The ground all around was covered with these ivory fragments, and I picked up a dozen of them. How odd this was, but when I picked up a tooth, an icy shiver shook my whole being, because it was a human molar, and my police forensic training and instinct warned that maybe all the bone pieces were human. I walked around the area in shock. The bones were piled into heaps a yard high; and when I looked closely, I saw they were chips and sections of femurs, skulls, digits, and the rest, covering about three acres of the mountainside.

~

I slipped through a back door to meet a loud, jolly tune echoing down the stairwell. The happy music grew louder as I tipped-toed up. I poked my head around a corner. Jay, big and a tad overweight, and my short, compact hunk Scotty were standing in the middle of the living room's braided carpet, pumping up and down from their knees and twisting their bodies to the music while flapping their arms like chicken wings, wagging their index fingers, and grinning deliriously. I felt sad because my news would end our honeymoon, but this had always been a possibility. I thought their party should last a little longer, so I lilted onto the carpet, tossed my parka, hat, and gloves on the floor, and joined the fun.

The boys had been carrying on for some time, and they were ready to quit after a few minutes. "I've got hot cocoa ready for you," Jay said when he had shut down the music.

I asked him to open his hand and I dropped in it the pieces of bone, each fairly identifiable. As he rolled them like marbles in his palm, his face turned wolf-like with a penetrating focus that rendered all other considerations non-existent. This was the Jay I first met and who didn't much appeal to me, but it was how he was good at his work.

"Where did you find these?"

I described the scene the best I could.

"Did you notice a stack of rocks, or a wall? A stone platform?"

"A rock outcrop."

"It might have been an altar. And so many people," he said to himself, now immersed in his mental process, which as he once explained was like achieving the blank state of mind a person reaches in a warm shower.

"Do you want me to call the Curator on the satellite phone?"

"The Circle will be embarrassed that no one found this field before. It's too late today to go look. I suppose we should find someone to date the bones and begin excavating."

"It's certainly out of my expertise, but I'd say these bones are not that old, no more than a hundred years."

"They could be thousands of years old."

"I'll start supper," I said briskly, annoyed for having my opinion dismissed. I *had* taken an osteology course.

"Scotty and I already cut salmon steaks and vegetables, so it's ready to cook."

"Why, thank you. You have your uses."

"Maybe we should have Peterson prepare meals for us. That's provided for in what we paid."

"Peterson is creepy. His wife has mental problems. She talks to herself."

"I talk to myself."

"She carries on in an everlasting soliloquy to no one in particular."

"And?"

"It's Greenlandic. The husband says it's about spaceships."

A slow smile spread over Jay's face and seemed to fill his whole body as he stood up. Here was the Jay I fell in love with. He had the wolfish focus, but added to it was joy. "The bones are something, to be sure. But this, this discovery might explain all."

"But, she's crazy, right?"

"There's a chance it might be about something real." He jumped up and ran toward our bedroom. I picked up Scotty and followed, finding him rooting through his equipment.

"What are you planning?" I asked to his back.

"I'll record the woman."

"Without her knowing? Steer clear of Peterson."

"Without *anyone* knowing. Tonight."

"What about the bones?"

"Oh, yeah," Jay said, recalling. "Contact Dr. Jagland, will you? She'll know what to do. Is it too late to ask Peterson to cook tonight? We need an excuse to be over there."

NIGHT ONE

Our honeymoon was over, I thought. I ended up cooking for me and Scotty while Jay probably ate Peterson's Danish stew and made his covert video, but Jay was full of surprises. Much later that night I woke up with his hand on my hip. Fully clothed, he was sitting beside me in the dim light.

"Let's take an adventure," he said.

I grumbled, and he kissed me on the cheek. "Just be quiet so you don't wake Scotty, and get dressed. Meet me at the front door."

My clothes were laid out neatly on a chair. I rinsed my face,

dressed, and found Jay holding a bundled-up Scotty, his chubby face composed in angelic slumber. I threw my parka on and followed Jay outside. Jay gave me a headlamp, but we didn't need them. The flaming, joyful stars above were wreathed by the pulsing, shooting green and purple aurora borealis. Jay headed down to the dock, and I hadn't gotten twenty yards before the breezy cold pierced my clothing.

"I'll be right back," I said, already trotting towards the house. Soon, enveloped by a goose down overcoat, I caught up with them. We reached the dock, and Jay turned up a path following the water's edge north. Before long, a rock hut emerged from the shadows. Inside the hut a single oil lamp burned in one corner, and against the wall a coal stove no bigger than an industrial soup pot glowed a blackened orange. Jay eased the bundled Scotty onto the stone floor and began stripping off his clothes.

"Wait," I said, dubious, even alarmed. "Ugh. It's too cold. Not here. Scotty might wake."

He just grinned sheepishly, and once down to his boxers said, "Join me, if you like", and hurried out the door back into the frost.

"What a wild man," I muttered and followed with the headlamp to see what in the world he had in mind. A few steps ahead I could see fog or steam drifting away from a wide pool. Jay was neck deep with his eyes closed.

"The water's great," he said dreamily. "It's 86 degrees."

I returned to the hut, hoisted the still snoozing Scotty, and set him down next to the pool. In a few minutes I was cuddling with Jay and gazing at the sky, the breeze refreshingly cool on my face. "This reminds me of camping in the Sierras," I said. "I was six years old. We borrowed a tent and stayed for one weekend. My parents were already old and tired by then—my next sibling was 18, you know. It was the last time Mama and Papa went anywhere, except day trips to the beach." I sighed. Scotty rustled in his sleeping bag and smacked his lips. Jay waded over to check on him, and when he returned, I said, "I remember the stars, so brilliant and alive away from the city lights and smog. But I've never seen a sky more beautiful than this."

"Inuit legends say the aurora borealis is the souls of dead children kicking around a walrus skull."

"How romantic."

"I'll tell you something truly romantic."

"Uh, huh."

"The water isn't heated from volcanism like in Iceland. Greenlandic hot springs originate from where deep layers of the earth's crust rub together."

I opened my mouth to rebuke him, but instead on impulse rapped a

knuckle on a pressure point in his forearm.

"Ow," he blurted and massaged his arm. "Wasn't that geological fact romantic?"

"I don't like coarse jokes."

"Okay." Jay didn't ask for an explanation. He didn't need another reminder about the vulgar innuendos directed to me and how I was denied a position as a school resource officer when I got pregnant with Scotty.

"You know why I quit law enforcement work? Yeah, the sexual comments from other officers, behind my back, to my face in the hallway, the sly flirting… but it wasn't just that. I hurt people. I used too much force. I shot someone once. That kid from El Salvador. You fought in a war. You know how it feels."

He didn't say anything. Instead, he put his hand around my waist and pulled me toward him.

We were floating—

"Mommy," the little insistent voice said. "Mom-mee."

Jay released me and waded back to Scotty. "Hey. We're having a night swim, Buddy." He unwrapped and undressed Scotty, lowered him squealing into the water, and brought him to me. Then he reached up to a small cooler on the rocks, which had been there all along, I guess, and pulled out bottles and two wine glasses. "Hard cider."

"Sorry, Jay. Honeymooning with a toddler. What do you expect?"

He laughed. "Exactly this. It's just right."

"Sorry for hurting you. I really am enjoying this. It's the furthest and longest I've been away from home."

A snowflake settled on my eyelash, though the sky was cloudless. Jay turned on the headlamp to reveal more feathery snow floating by like dandelion umbrellas. "From the steam," he said.

We talked a while longer then rushed back to the hut, dried off, and dressed. Scotty grinned and giggled the whole time. On the path to the house, I gazed up toward the promontory with the bone field behind it. A faint outline of stars traced the profile of the mountain.

One star, however… One wavering star crept up through the shadow.

"What's that?" Jay said.

"Someone."

"Who, I wonder?"

We watched for a minute. The light stopped, winked off and then on, and kept climbing.

"Peterson the caretaker," I said. "I don't like him. No one else but he and his wife are here, yet, right?"

DAY FIVE

Within three days the Circle had invited a dozen world-renowned archeologists and paleontologists who proceeded to withdraw from classrooms, committee meetings, concert halls, or away from remote, inaccessible, career-enhancing digs, and who had thrown their toothbrushes and extra underwear into duffels, grabbed their toolkits, and chased down the next flights to Reykjavík from Tokyo, Beijing, Bombay, Jo-burg, Tel Aviv, Berlin, Chicago, Bozeman and Sidney. The Curator, Dr. Jagland arrived first from Oslo and relegated our family to our private bedroom, while the rest of the Greenland House, plus the caretaker's residence, had been co-opted for the incoming scientists and service staff.

Jay, carrying Scotty in a backpack, and I began walking down the mountainside after observing their work at the already gridded and partially excavated bone yard. We had *attempted* to observe. Chilling fog and stiff rain squalls laced with snow rushed down the mountain toward the fjord, obscuring our views from the "promontory".

"If these rocks are not an altar, as the archeologists now say, what explains the bones?" I asked Jay.

A freshening gust of wind blew off Jay's hood. Scotty sucked in a deep breath as if the wind was suffocating him. "I can't believe they're working in this weather," I shouted.

We gave up trying to talk until we reached the house, fought our way through the basement door, and hung our wet things to dry in the toasty, tectonic heat. Jay said, "The bone field can only tell us what *wasn't* happening here, and we know that already, so they're wasting their time."

The house was reputedly impervious to weather, either of drafts, leaks, and sounds, and we couldn't tell if a storm was raging outside, so when Scotty slipped in a puddle at the foot of the stairs that led to the uppermost floor, we were puzzled. I looked up at the ceiling, but Jay went to the front door. "Someone tracked in a lot of snow."

"Everyone is on the mountainside." I reached for my sidearm, which of course wasn't there, since they're illegal for non-citizens.

Jay trotted up the stairs.

I hoisted Scotty and followed to find Jay in the doorway of one of the bedrooms, from which a relentless chanting of "ba, ba, ba, ba" issued. He stepped aside to let me in. There next to the bed was Peterson bent over his wife in the wheelchair. Her head was flopped sideways, one arm was waving in random circles, and it was she who was chanting.

"She's had an aneurysm or something," Peterson said in a thick voice speaking weakly with the top of his lungs. "She's to die in the

house. It's in her papers."

"Her advance directives?"

"She doesn't want a doctor. No interventions."

I'm not medically trained beyond first aid, but the woman appeared to me like she wasn't dying; there was some fire within her that wouldn't extinguish easily. I felt her forehead. "She's feverish. She should be on antibiotics."

"Not if she's terminal. We can't risk going to the hospital. She must die in the house."

"Why?" Jay asked, aglow with the excitement he displays when he thinks he's on the verge of a discovery.

Peterson shrugged. "I love her, and must honor her wish."

"But," I said, beginning to explain how there was no room in the stone house, that we couldn't send away the archeologist and his assistants who had crammed into this space, when Jay led me out into the hallway. The ba, ba, ba chanting grew louder.

"They—the archeologists—can have our bedroom," Jay said. "We'll move to the main room."

"We booked the whole house, paid for it in advance. None of these people should be here."

"Listen," he said, "this woman may open the mystery. Hundreds of people, possibly thousands of years ago came to this location, either against their will to be killed, or voluntarily to die naturally. Maybe there's a connection. Solving the mystery is why we came, right? I have an idea. The caretaker's house has backpacking tents. I'll put one up in the front room and keep everyone else out." He didn't wait for me to respond, but dashed away.

"I can't lift her alone," Peterson was saying, clearly intending to put her into one of the beds.

DAY SEVEN

Now that the Greenland House was jammed with people, including Peterson and Ane, his fiercely vital, incoherent wife supposedly dying in our bedroom, the only semi-quiet place was the public part of the caretaker's house. I was making a late breakfast in the kitchen area while Jay and Dr. Jagland at the table gazed at the persistent, impenetrable fog outside the window. Scotty toddled around the floor with his charming stalking gait, his body bouncing side to side with each deliberate footfall. He looked so confident and manly, but he still crossed his legs up and tripped every other minute. He never said a word, but just got back on his feet and toddled on, around and around in circles, handing Jay an empty plastic cup. Jay slurped air noisily and gave the cup back to Scotty.

Dr. Jagland was elegantly slender and toned in her tailored Caribou fur and white leather costume and stiff boots. Were it not for her passion for the most mysterious architectural treasures of the planet, she might have wasted her life in a long career as a movie star or model. Jay had said she had never married. She shook herself from some inner meditation, breaking a long lull. "How long does Simigag have?"

"A hospice nurse arrived by float plane this morning," Jay said. "She said another day or two. The woman will die of dehydration, eased by morphine on the tongue."

Jagland seemed to have nothing to say.

I knew what Jay was thinking and that he wouldn't comment, so I said it from the kitchenette. "She's not terminal. She might have had a stroke, but they could treat her. She's mentally ill." I knew it made no difference and there was nothing we could do to intervene to prevent the hastening of her death, but I had to say the truth.

"I must be frank, Mr. Barron, the spaceship idea is ludicrous, and I'd rather not discuss it anymore. Your wife's discovery of the bone field, however, is immense, second only to the importance of the house. There was a sophisticated Paleolithic settlement here. We may find other buildings buried under nearby ice. I think the Circle will allow you reveal the house to the world on your radio program tomorrow. You've won the prize."

"We need more information. Unlike most of these guys on the airwaves, I'm not a sensationalist, ma'am. The house is fascinating, but the bone field is still unexplained. My radio program is about real things, fantastic but real. I hate to be callous, but I'm waiting to see what happens when the woman dies."

"Jay," I said, bringing a platter of sausage and eggs to the table. "You're awful."

"So, Mr. Barron, you believe a spaceship will come hovering over the Greenland House to take the woman's soul to Paradise?"

"What's the current population of Greenland?"

"Fifty-six thousand."

"How many crushed skeletons are on the mountainside?"

Jagland spread her hands to say no one could be sure.

"It's possible a huge number people once believed something of the sort," Jay said. "It's possible this woman who lived here for years picked up some impulse from the house about its true purpose. As a way station."

"You said you weren't a sensationalist."

"I speculate. It's my investigative process."

Several wordless minutes passed while they stuffed in food, Jagland keeping up with Jay forkful by forkful. I sat Scotty onto a pil-

low on a chair and tied him in. He joined their stuffing party, while I rinsed fruit for my smoothie.

Jagland pushed away from the table and stood up. “Thank you dearly for the breakfast, Mrs. Barron. I’m sorry your vacation didn’t turn out to be much of a holiday.” She stepped to the coat rack near the door and began working into her fur overcoat. “I’ll let you know the Circle’s decision about announcing the house. I’m positive they’re ready to reveal its existence—frankly, it will help in securing funding. Important patrons are arriving this afternoon. Meanwhile, I’m off to the dig. We hope to find tools of slaughter deeper down today.”

With that, Jagland made her departure.

“More people,” I muttered to myself, then, “This will be loud,” I said, and turned on the food processor. At the spurt of grinding, chopping noise, I couldn’t help but imagine the dismembering of human bodies. I brought the smoothie to the table. “What’s on for today?”

“What we planned. You go for your exercise walk and later sit with the old woman. I play with Scotty. For a start, he and I’ll wash dishes. Be sure to take map and compass. I’ll give you my pistol. You’ll feel safer if you meet old Peterson in the dark.”

“Pistol? You brought a firearm? I don’t believe it.”

“I always bring a gun. An H&K .45 caliber. It’s a part of my work kit.”

~

I only took a map, compass, a headlamp, and the satellite phone. As I’ve said, I didn’t want to be a cop anymore. Since the freezing fog obliterated the scenic views, I expected not to linger—a quick march up and back, just enough to help me sleep. It was past sunset, which at that time of year was about 2:30 pm, but there was plenty of light. I wanted to be back early enough to read to Ane. She had stopped swallowing, and because Peterson had medical power of attorney, he refused to put her on an IV drip. I was angry, and depressed from being unable to help. I felt like when my own elderly parents died when I was in high school. All I could do for Ane now was read to her from the Psalms in the Bible. It gave her peace, I know, because while I read, she stopped chanting,

At some point, I heard disembodied voices ahead in the fog, loud voices in multiple languages. It took a while for the bodies to reach me, the workers and scientists descending from the dig. I stepped aside to let them pass, and many said *hello* and *be careful*. The voices moved down the mountain, and I continued on the trail, turning left away from the cliffs and the bone yard.

Time passed, and I had been occupied in thinking about calling a lawyer in Nuuk tomorrow about Ane. I checked the satellite phone. I

had been walking uphill for almost an hour. Time to turn around.

It was darkening, but I decided to not put the headlamp on until I couldn't see the trail. When I passed the new trail leading up to the bone yard, a lumpish figure emerged from the textured fog below.

"Jay," I called, thinking he might have hiked up to meet me. "Jay?" The figure didn't answer, but kept trudging forward. When I stopped, it did, and this is when I turned the headlamp on, high beam.

It was Peterson with a burlap bag slung over his shoulder.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He dropped the bag, looked up at me, and drew a long knife. "You shouldn't be here," was all he said.

Once again I reached for my absent gun and wished I had brought Jay's.

He paused, and seeing my empty hand, he advanced, holding the knife ready to slash. I stepped off the trail, hoping to run around him, but he was steady on the ice and rock, and I was not. "What do you want, Mr. Peterson?" I asked, hoping to touch something reasonable. "I'm not sure what you want, sir."

"I want to go home, to Denmark," he said, coming closer and shifting the knife to a stabbing position. "It's depressing here. I need money to return to Denmark. I told you to stay away from the cliffs. They're dangerous. People fall to their deaths."

He ran at me and I fell. I grabbed a rock. When I regained my feet he was right there and lunging. All I remember is arching away from the knife and pounding his arm. He yelled in pain and dropped the knife. Then I had him on the ground in a stranglehold, both of us rolling together downhill. When we stopped, I tightened the hold until he stopped struggling, then I untangled myself and jumped up, but he didn't move. I tapped him with my boot, then bent down to check his vitals.

Nothing. I might have killed him. I had cut off the blood flow to his brain and killed him. Maybe.

~

I'm not sure how I packed Peterson on my shoulder as far as I did. Adrenaline, I guess, and guilt. Jay met me halfway, and I transferred my burden to him. He was somber and silent, preoccupied with something else, I guess. I was too depressed to ask him what it was as I trudged behind adding my headlamp's beam to his, and with the fog sweeping over us, all we could see was our feet and a moving patch of ground. Within a sphere of its own light, the house, diminutive at first, grew larger moment by moment, each window projecting a distinct glowing rectangle. When we arrived, Jay asked me to open the door.

"Shouldn't we leave the body outside?" I said.

"Are you a doctor, love? He's not dead. He's been groaning for the last few minutes."

Inside, the house was strangely quiet. Jay carried Peterson into the front room while I removed my outer layers near the door. I was sitting on a chair and undoing my boots as Jagland came in holding Scotty. Her face looked radiant, like an angel who beheld both terror and joy without either weakening the other.

"I have bad news," she said, handing Scotty to me. "Ane died while you were gone. I'm sorry you weren't here." She paused, and I could tell it was awkward for her to affect sadness, because she wasn't sad in the slightest. Sad was too weak a word for how I felt. "But you need to see this," she said.

I followed her into our front room crowded with people facing the front window. They had taken down our tent. Jay was fiddling with one of his video cameras on a tripod. The crowd parted for me. I walked up and stopped at a waist-high stone bench that hadn't been there before. What should have been visible from the windows was darkness and fog. Instead, stars bigger and more brilliant and colorful than possible, like photographs from the Hubble telescope, but this was 3-D real.

"Closer," Jay said, nudging me. "Look down into the frame."

My arms trembling from fatigue, I put Scotty on the bench and stepped around. The stars were down there too, where outside it would be the bulk of the Earth.

"We are seeing the stars through the edge of the planet in their true positions," Jagland said from behind me. "Every window in the house is like this. Every star in the sky is visible. I think we will see them even after sunrise. In comparison, this… this makes Stonehenge as primitive as…"

"A boy's building blocks," I said.

Jay was standing next to Scotty to ensure he didn't fall off the bench, and Scotty was flat on his stomach wriggling and feeling the stone, rubbing his hands over the smooth, glossy surface. What happened next was exactly like when you are flying, and the jet hits an air pocket; everyone feels it at the same time, and someone screams. I was facing Jay and Scotty, and I had to take a step forward to catch myself. A woman next to me sat down hard on the floor and squealed. One gentleman said, "Earthquake?" and everyone else began blabbing at once, Jay's excited voice above the others. "I saw them. The stars blurred." He ran to the front door and threw it open. Fog swirled around him. "Damn," he roared, "We're still on Earth. Or, I think so. Nobody touch that bench!"

Scotty was on the bench, dangling his feet and looking at everyone in wonder. I snatched him into my arms. Feeling all the eyes staring at

him, he puckered up and cried.

NIGHT SEVEN

The crowded front room had been our only private space, so we had no option but to shoo people off a corner couch and claim it as our own. I hummed a lullaby to Scotty while Jay saw that Peterson was restrained and watched—they moved him to the bedroom with Ane's body. I kept wishing I could have done more for her. Jay returned, plopped next to me and put his arm around my shoulder. Our honeymoon had compacted to this—our threesome on a couch in a room full of smart people gazing at the stars through an enchanted window. Jagland moved among the crowd and whispered in people's ears. I read her lips saying, "The family requires quiet. Please observe at one of the other windows." People edged away until only a handful was left…

"The portal faded." That was Jay's voice beside me, waking me up. He pushed himself off the couch and stretched, flexing his shoulders backwards. The room was empty. Through the window now, fog had regained the lower sky, but a few smudgy stars sailed up high.

"The stone bench sunk into the floor," Jay said. He ran his hand over the glass, and at his movement, the brilliant stars sprang back in the view. "Ah, still active." He turned on his headlamp and peered closely at the framework. I carefully set Scotty down fast asleep on the couch and covered him with a blanket.

"Apparently," Jay said, "when they installed modern windows they didn't alter the stone framework. The rock is the same as the bench," he said, kneeling on the floor.

"I need to do some things," I said, giving Jay a kiss.

"It's 2:00 a.m., you know."

"I've had a nap," I said over my shoulder and ran up the stairs.

Our old room on the second floor blazed with light. With his eyes closed, a muscley grad student was leaning back in an easy chair next to the bed while clutching a sheaf of papers. The hospice nurse on a cot on the far side of the room was snoring gently. Peterson, wide awake on his side with his hands lashed to the bed frame glared at me. Behind him lay Ane, flat on her back with her arms folded on her chest, her head propped up, her face with its sunken cheeks immobile, and her body motionless, reminding me of my dead mother. A warm wave of sorrow rose up and softened my frozen feelings. I breathed in shallow breaths until the sadness passed and I turned to leave.

"Dim the damn lights, will you?" Peterson said.

I tiptoed downstairs to find Jay sound asleep on the couch with Scotty in his arms. I collected my goose down overcoat and gloves, and passing Jagland's office that she had set up in a utility closet, I heard

her urgent voice inside speaking a Middle Eastern language.

Outdoors, it seemed the view from the windows had extended to the sky, sweeping it clear of fog, and even of the aurora borealis. I stopped and stared.

A feeling of motion, like being on a boat, made me believe I was falling. I hunkered down and touched one hand to the ground. From the rocky shore below rose the sound of waves laden with chunks of ice rumbling back and forth, but without wind to generate the agitation. Overhead it seemed the stars were growing more intense. I imagined looking down at myself and the stone house growing smaller and slipping to the side. Everything below became dark, then speckled with flaming orange clusters until a bright bulge emerged from an orb and grew into a crescent that broke free—the sunrise over Earth from a thousand miles high, and the Moon opposite, which all shrank until the rotating Earth disappeared, and the Sun dwindled into a diminishing pinpoint of light spiraling among millions of other points. But all along in the picture, I knew exactly where I was, crouching on the path to the caretaker's house.

After shaking myself to reestablish the illusion of the planet's fixedness, I completed the short distance to the caretaker's house and pushed open the door to the dark gift shop. Body bags covered the floor. Full body bags in my headlamp's beam, and my heart and breath jumped into turbo. Peterson's work! One of the bags rolled over and mumbled grumpily, "Turn out that light."

Oh. The overflow slept here. "Sorry," I mumbled, dimmed the headlamp, picked my way across, and eased through the door into the caretaker's living space.

Cardboard boxes lined the hallway and were stacked into a neat cube nearly head high in the middle of the sitting room. On one side of the room was a coal stove, still warm, and near it a wooden table. Upstairs, two locked suitcases had been placed ready for a traveler to pick up, one for each hand. I pulled out the drawers. All were empty. The closet was empty. The bathroom had been cleaned and still smelled of disinfectant. Downstairs again—the boxes were sealed and labeled for shipping. Peterson was prepared to bolt for Denmark, obviously, but to learn anything about his money situation and why he attacked me, I'd have to open boxes. I returned to the cube and stared at it before I lifted one of the boxes. It was soft and silent, full of clothing, maybe, women's clothing, by the odor of Ane's perfume. Here was a clue—an empty box with its flaps up.

"Need help?"

Startled, I jerked around ready to fight. Whew. It was Jay who laughed and said, "I knew you'd be here."

"Okay. I need to inspect these boxes. If I'm to open any without a warrant, I need probable cause." I smiled and said, "Glad you're here. I assume someone's watching Scotty."

"Jagland's talking with the astronomers, but she's keeping an eye on him. Shouldn't you wait for Greenland authorities?"

Anger surged through me, and sorrow. "The authorities don't care about Ane! They don't care if Peterson hastened her death, that he murdered her."

Jay was smart. He put his arms around me before saying, "Isn't it obvious that Peterson was carving bones and selling them?"

Of course. I tried to push away from Jay, but he held tighter. How did he figure this out so easy? I wanted to help Ane and couldn't. I wanted to help my mom and dad and couldn't. I wanted to punish my older brother and sister for killing my parents, for hastening their deaths. I wanted to punish Peterson for killing Ane. But stealing bones from an archeological site compared to Ane and my parents? It just didn't matter. It was invisible to me. I'd have to hit it head-on.

I felt so helpless. I pictured Ane's desiccated face, her drooping, silent mouth and sunken eye sockets. Her thin hands, her brushed hair. All of my feelings about Scotty and Jay, our busted honeymoon, leaving the police force, being bitter toward my siblings, being left behind by my parents, my inability to help them, all surged into an overwhelming sorrow that dissolved the construct enabling me to function, to present a composed persona… For a few minutes I cried like I hadn't since I was sixteen.

Jay held me until I leaned away from him and sat down in a chair.

"Mom died first and then Dad," I said, my voice clouded. "She had been sick a long time, and collapsed over the course of a month, and then Dad withered away, probably dying of heartbreak and loneliness, if nothing else. Except they starved him on purpose. All of this passed me by in a blinding blur. I was the only one still living at home and as soon they put Dad in a nursing facility, my oldest brother made me leave my school and friends in Lynchville to move in with him in San Diego. My sister and the rest of them handled the medical and funeral decisions."

"That's how you ended up attending the police academy in San Diego," Jay said.

"Yeah."

We were quiet for a while, just thinking—me about Mom and Dad's flower bed in our decayed neighborhood overrun by Mexican gangs. Then I thought about how small all of this was compared to the vision of the stars I had seen outside. I stood up and looked at the cube of boxes. "How did you discover Peterson's scheme?"

He pulled a figure from his pocket. "I brought this from the gift shop, from the glass case."

I took the carving in hand, a yellow, dog-like monster with a tiny human skull, its tongue sticking out, walking on its knees and elbows, and ribs sharp and circling its torso like threads of a bolt. I thrust it back to Jay. "It's hideous."

"It's a cross between a Malacandrian sorn and a pfifltrigg. It's called a tupilak and they're associated with witchcraft. Peterson is a skilled carver. Some of his figures are polar bears and such for children—but a few in the case are stranger than this one."

"Made from human bone."

Jay lifted down a smaller box from the cube. "This one addressed to Fairbanks probably contains carvings. I guess many of these big boxes are stuffed with uncarved bones he intended to ship to Denmark."

"When will the authorities pick him up tomorrow?" I asked. "I'm afraid he might get free."

"After the broadcast."

DAY EIGHT

"We're moving," a strange voice said in my dream.

I opened my eyes and sat up. Our bedroom—the darkened front room of the stone house—was once again full of silent people staring at the star-jeweled window. Scotty was playing a wordless patty-cake with a blonde female grad student, and Jay was standing next to our couch holding a coffee cup, his chest rising and falling. He leaned over and whispered breathlessly, "The entire solar system is moving."

This made no sense, because, of course, the solar system is moving. Once on my feet, I said, "How long have I been sleeping?"

He looked at his wristwatch like it was a new discovery. "Ten in the morning," he said and drifted closer to the window.

"Wait," I said, and before he got too far away I snatched his coffee cup, while noticing people watching as if waiting for us to finish our conversation.

The strange voice from my dream again spoke from near the window full of living stars, from a short man wearing an Arabian headdress. "Many of you know already, in the past nine hours we've corroborated with astronomers around the planet, and it's incontrovertible that the solar system has moved, is presently moving away from the galactic path it has held to since mankind kept records. I and my assistants compared historic star maps with the current, still evolving, configuration of celestial bodies, and we have traveled approximately…" Here he paused.

One of the people sitting against the wall with laptops looked up and said, "271 light-years."

"271 light-years," the Arabian man said.

"272," the laptop person corrected.

"Okay, we are moving at unimaginable speed. Looking at the window, you might not tell with the naked eye the minute changes in the angels, I mean angles—sorry—of the major stars. The vast distances of space preclude you from detecting dramatic changes, just as you would not notice the stars spinning overhead on a clear night as the Earth rotates at 1675 kilometers per hour. The Earth circles the sun at 107,000 kilometers an hour. Our solar system normally plods along at 70,000 kilometers an hour in the direction of the bright star Vega in constellation Lyra, giving our planets a beautiful vortex motion. All this remained the same for eons, but now our speed and direction have altered."

As I watched the window, I couldn't see movement, but I felt as if the heavens before us were pulsing, as if some heart was pumping its lifeblood through the cosmos and some mind directed the busy, infinitely complex traffic. Could the universe be the body of God? I wondered what my Spanish priest at home would say.

The Arabian man was still speaking…

"So, we have few answers. We don't know how we can travel faster than light. It's impossible as we understand physics. What we can say is that the tug every sentient person in the world felt at 5:46 PM, GMT on November 12 was the breaking of inertia. The solar system accelerated imperceptibly in a new direction and now it's decelerating. The ocean waves that the jolt generated were worldwide, and apart from a few floods of low-lying areas, damage and injury were minimal. The sun, or Solar, is in a quiescent phase, like nothing we've known. Perhaps the sun is the energy plant for our journey. Lastly, back to where I began, the solar system is moving as a whole. All of the planets from Mercury to the reinstated Pluto are all in their proper places. We are moving as a family."

Before the Arabian guy finished, Jagland had stepped forward to raise her hand and she spoke the instant he stopped. "Dr. al-Saghani won't be taking questions right now—he's traveled all night to get here—but there's one item I must mention. Of course, the dig on the mountain will continue. Now that we know something about the house, it may give a basis to theorize about the bone field, which in turn will help us understand what's happening in the heavens. But I want to introduce to you the person who will explain to the world what we know so far. Anyone who is paying attention is wondering. Many people are scared. They feel a literal cosmic shift, but they have no idea

what's happening. That's why as soon as we break here, we're setting the room up as a sound studio to broadcast by satellite to the entire world. We can't wait a moment longer. Already rumors are circulating, and astronomers are publicly speculating. Needless to say, charlatans will find a way to mislead and exploit. There's only one person on the planet who has enough credibility in matters like this. His experience in what we call the paranormal has been validated scientifically in every case. Not only is his investigative technique impeccable, his is a man of subtle and unfailing intuition. He always seems to be in the right place. And I can see by how he's acting that this praise makes him uncomfortable because of another of his character traits. Humility. I give you Jonathan T. Barron."

The applause was in fact subdued, but it thundered in my ears. Jay was kind and smart, and as only a few people knew, was competent with firearms and covert military ops, but I had never given regard to his celebrity status. Well, he was on radio and never made personal appearances, so people never got a look at him. Right now he was beet red, but his discomfiture did not affect his voice.

"Thanks," he said simply. "We hope to broadcast live within the hour. There's no time to talk with anyone beforehand, but if you have any questions for me or Professor al-Saghani, umm, give them to my wife, Isabel, and she'll screen them, and, recopy them if necessary to make them legible. Is that okay, love?"

"Sure enough," I said.

"And I need to introduce someone else really special. He's a natural, a true scientist and explorer, blundering into discoveries that changed…" As he glanced at me I thought he might cry, but he got out, "changed everything. He's the person who launched humanity, the world, the sun, and all the planets into a journey to a place unknown. Our son, Scotty, right there, and please, please don't let him climb onto that stone bench again."

Everyone laughed.

~

By lunchtime, the house's front room, our "honeymoon suite" and then conference room, had been transformed into a broadcast studio. Jay stood by and supervised the arrangement of tables and chairs, video cameras for the news conference, microphones, the mixer board and the satellite linkups, and then he tested it all with the engineer from North Carolina. It all came together at the last moment for airtime.

The first part of the broadcast was to be a straightforward reiteration of what we knew already and a Q&A, but a version for the whole world—or anyone who cared to watch, which Dr. Jagland estimated would be a billion people. The timing of the televised news conference

roughly coincided with Jay's regular weekly program, so there was supposed to be only a commercial station-break between them, Jay's program to follow on radio only, and be, as he said, "exploratory, risky, and much more interesting."

"We are live," Jay's engineer said.

Jay, Jagland, and Professor al-Saghani fielded the half dozen questions from the crews, giving extended more-or-less varied adaptations of "We don't know," and they were about to wrap up the televised part when we heard shouting and what sounded like a body tumbling down the stairs. A woman gasped, another screamed, then Peterson marched into the room, his chest heaving, his face twitching, and gripping a shotgun in both hands.

"The keys to the yacht," he said, hoarsely. "Where are they?"

Since he was live, Jay kept talking, and when no one answered Peterson's question, he let the shotgun swing on its sling, pulled a knife and grabbed Scotty, who just happened to totter by. Peterson babbled on about needing help loading his boxes, and Jay kept talking—his hands twitching behind his back while saying, "So, the solar system is galloping across the galaxy at impossible speeds, and the charnel remains of hundreds, maybe thousands of human beings lie on the mountainside above us, but as yet we have no answers, no information to link this house—that is, the command center—with the bones."

At this, Peterson's head jerked up, and I walked behind Jay, leaned down, and took the pistol he'd been flicking, its hammer back and ready to fire. Scotty began crying, sensing the tension and being squeezed by Peterson, who now held the point of his knife at our child's heart.

"This concludes our worldwide news conference," Jay said, "but for more discussion, stay tuned for my regular program, Strange Days Radio, when we will pick up with some guesswork, and hopefully dramatic new information. If your station doesn't carry my program, you may listen at www.chaoticterrain.com."

Peterson had been talking during this and was saying, "The answer is, people think the house will carry them to Heaven."

Jay flicked his glance to me and made a cutting gesture at his throat, supposedly to tell the engineer to cut the feed, but I took it as a sign. Peterson's knife was waving in the air as he spoke and I raised Jay's pistol and froze, then an eternity-in-a-second later I shot Peterson twice cleanly in the head. Jay had vaulted the table and snatched Scotty as Peterson jerked backward to the floor and began convulsing in his death throes.

The big picture window clouded for an instant and revealed the stars again.

People had been screaming, muttering, cursing, praying out loud, and shouting in response to the shots, and in a brief silence that followed, the engineer said, "Okay, people. We are in a station break, top of the hour. We're live again, on radio, in… four and a half minutes. Somebody better look at that guy."

I sank into the nearest chair and watched through an emotional stupor. Jay had been talking to me. I glanced up and he said, "Are you all right?" in a tone that told me he'd already asked several times. I nodded, and he slipped the gun from my hand, removed the clip, cleared the chamber, and set it all on the table. Then he put Scotty in my lap and kissed me on top of the head. Scotty gave me a perfunctory hug and slipped to the floor.

One of the archaeologists knelt down next to Peterson. "He's dead, totally. Shouldn't we call Emergency Services, or its Greenlandic equivalent?"

Someone said, "We're way too remote. The police are due now, anyway."

Someone else covered Peterson with a blanket and Scotty ran to investigate, but the blonde graduate student caught him up and said, "Let's go upstairs and play." Before I knew it, everyone was in place, Jagland, Professor al-Saghani, and the producer was counting down.

"We're skipping the theme music," Jay said quickly, and then he was talking in his professional voice, though more somber than usual.

"Dear Friends. Welcome to Strange Days Radio, a special broadcast following up on the international press conference where we shared what we've discovered here at the Greenlandic House on the east coast of Greenland. I'm sure many of you watched, and you may have heard shouting in the background in the final seconds. That voice you heard belonged to the long-time caretaker of this site, a Mr. Peterson. Peterson is dead. He died just now. In fact, his body is lying on the floor a few yards from me. Mr. Peterson had taken my son Scotty hostage with a carving knife, and in the last moments before he was shot, Peterson gave us a clue that pulls together everything we know about this place. We are improvising here folks, so bear with me… Mr. Engineer, please roll the Ane Peterson tape, it's number one. And Dr. Jagland, will you translate? Put on those headphones. Mr. Engineer, after four seconds, pull the gain back on Ane's voice so it's barely heard. While they're cueing up, I'll explain that Ane appeared to have a mental illness, and I recorded her babbling without her knowledge. No one has heard this recording before. She died yesterday as a result of a serious infection. Ready?"

The engineer said, "Go."

Jagland paused to take in Ane's first words and began translating in

a halting rhythm, a mixture of pauses, slow phrasing, and spurts. I listened for a moment and moved to the couch. This is what Jagland said Ane was saying:

"I said, 'The American girl stared at me with a mixture of fear and pity.' Maybe she will listen. 'The spaceship will take us to Heaven,' I said to her. 'It's a long, long way. If we die in the house,' I said to Peterson, 'once the spaceship arrives, we can climb aboard and it will take us to Heaven.' We must die in the house, and the ship will arrive. But I told my first husband, 'The souls of the whales that you killed in the bay went to Heaven. I saw the ship with my own eyes. It was made of wheels, dear, wheels and balls spinning around, with a giant light in the middle. Our baby that died, her soul is floating in the auroras, she's playing football… soccer up there in the night sky…' That Mr. Peterson, I don't like him. He's not trustworthy. He doesn't sleep with me, at all. He never did. Our ceremony was meaningless. Three years of so-called marriage. He took my money, but I'm so close. It's what matters. Death is near. Those bones, so many like me—they reached Heaven. His carvings are nasty. The spaceship approaches. It's there, drawing me like a lover. 'This world is sad and full of pain,' I said, 'the American girl with amber skin, maybe she's Inuit.' I hope she comes back to see me. I like her. The spaceship is a chariot, a dog sled to Heaven. 'If only I can die in the house,' I said, 'then my life will be complete.'"

Jagland paused as Ane's voice rambled on. "She's repeating herself," Jagland said. "There's nothing new."

"We can listen later," Jay said. "Ordinarily we'd break for a commercial, but this is too important. My sponsors will understand—they're listed on my website. I've been thinking during Dr. Jagland's translation, and I believe I have a more complete picture now of what this means. But, frankly, I need a break. Mr. Engineer. Have you got one minute of appropriate music? Okay, I'll be back."

The engineer stared blankly for three silent seconds, his stoic face then morphed into a grin and he plugged in his phone and cued up some pulsing, golden, harp and violin music.

Jay came over to me, lifted me to my feet and hugged me, nearly squeezing the life out of me. I could tell he was crying. Me? I felt numb and let his emotion melt through me. "I'm sorry you had to shoot him, but thank you for saving Scotty," he said, his voice trembling in a way I've never heard before. "I love you," he said, kissed me, and trotted back to his microphone.

He let the music play to the end and said, "I'm back. However urgent or desperate or important your life is folks, never neglect your family. The news will come out later, but my wife has just gone through the most difficult experience she'll ever face, and she and I

needed a little private time. Okay. Here's my speculation on this whole story. Um, first some questions."

"Dr. Jagland, is it true that the Greenlandic House was built before the arrival of the Europeans?"

"Correct."

"Is there any building in the world like it?"

"It's unique. The technology is unknown."

"Is it true that the archeologists have not found an altar at the site with the bones?"

"It doesn't appear that ancient human sacrifice took place here."

"When do you believe the house was built?"

"Archeologists have many opinions, but *my* best assessment is that it predates the historical period."

"So, how old?"

"Before 10,000 BC."

"And the first humans came to Greenland when?"

"2500 BC. Umm. I fear to say it professionally, but I believe the house is as old as the Earth, once it cooled."

"Professor al-Saghani, is the solar system still moving in its new direction?"

"It is, but it's slowing. It could stop at any moment. Or at least resume its normal speed and direction."

"Thank you. Here's my speculation."

Jay sighed big and began. "Ages ago an advanced race of beings built the solar system to be a space traveling vessel. The sun is the power source, the Earth the living quarters, and the other planets, by means beyond our comprehension, form the engine of locomotion. It is by far larger than any spaceship imagined by the most inventive science-fiction writers, and it's really real. The house here is a control center for the vessel. Where these beings came from or where they went, we'll never know. It's possible they looked like Greenlandic carvings of the dog-like monster, the tupilak, and folklore preserved their image. The purpose of the solar system as a space vehicle was to carry this race of beings someplace, to a place of idyllic beauty and harmony. A place like what most of us yearn for—one without conflict, pain, or death. A place of continuous, eternal joy and peace, of life everlasting. A return to Eden, or the Kingdom of Heaven. From our experience on this present Earth—the wars, genocides, famines—I'm guessing that our planet never arrived at this place. The vessel wandered the universe for eons and ages unknown. Perhaps the place never existed, or perhaps the vessel simply was not the correct means to reach Heaven. Many Earth traditions believe that people can reach Heaven only through death. In particular, one of our dominant traditions claims

that only through the sacrifice of the Creator's child could the portal to Heaven be opened. This extinct race of stellar engineers apparently thought they could find another way. The space vessel then, represents a marvelous, ingenious, though ultimately failed attempt.

"Well, that's my speculation. Now for the bones. It seems clear that a human death activates the controls in the house, which in turn change the solar system's direction and speed." He paused for a second, and then as if to himself, muttered, "But, what if we learn to work the controls ourselves?" He whistled softly, and then continued. "The house emanates a spiritual magnetism drawing people here. It triggers a yearning for Heaven and gives people a vision it can never fulfill. The bones on the mountainside are from those who for centuries came from around the planet to die. It's simple. And it's tragic and odd.

"As I mentioned, and I hope I'm not too macabre, but a few feet from where I am speaking, the corpse of the caretaker of this site, Mr. Peterson, awaits the legal authorities of Greenland. Peterson was a talented carver of ivory and bone. But there was something not right about Mr. Peterson, and it's more than the fact that he attacked my wife yesterday and today grabbed our 16-month-old son, threatening to stab him in the heart. We have here (he nodded to a graduate student) a box Mr. Peterson had packed for shipping to Denmark, his home country. We're opening this package now. I'm not sure what we'll find, but a grad student is cutting the box open and removing the tissue paper that wraps a heavy, irregularly shaped object. If my guess is correct… I suggest you wear gloves."

The student handed the object, a flat bone, about the shape of an ear, a grossly oversized ear, to Jagland, who winced, and covered her mouth and nose. She passed the bone to me and I took one look and flung it to the floor. It skidded up to the lump of Peterson's body and stopped.

"It's a human iliac fossa," I said. "The hip bone, and it's fresh… or I should say, not fresh."

Just then a booming noise echoed down from the hallway. Someone banging on the front door. The someone didn't wait, but threw the door open, causing it to slam against the wall.

"Hello, hello," a feeble male voice called.

Jay called back, "Everyone's in here."

An elderly couple, a hunched, white-haired woman holding two carry-on bags and wearing indigo blue running shoes leading an even older, bright-eyed man shuffling behind his walker, rounded the corner. Jay described the scene to his listeners, and holding his microphone, he approached the visitors.

"Who are you people?" the man said, glaring around the packed

room, searching for someone to punch in the face, maybe. “Have you booked passage to Heaven, too? Mr. Peterson, the travel agent, said it was just two of us. Two passages for the Kirkpatricks from Denver.”

“Mr. Peterson is dead,” Jay said and gestured to the corpse.

“Is he now?” he said with a stunned, bewildered glower. “Is the voyage delayed, then?”

“Definitely.”

“Damn it. How disappointing. But we’ll expect a refund. Mr. and Mrs. Kirkpatrick. And we’ll need a place to live. We sold everything, bought one-way tickets, and left our retirement home.”

“We’re not married,” the old lady said, swinging her bags as she cut an elaborate, silly, caper in her blue shoes. “We’re living in sin.”

As I rose to my feet, I felt a sudden, harsh jerk, the same jarring sensation as when the solar system changed its motion. Mrs. Kirkpatrick swayed to and fro until she suddenly, involuntarily fell back upon a couch that was behind her.

“We have arrived,” Professor al-Saghani said. “We’ve more or less settled, somewhere.”

“Come with me,” I said to the perplexed couple, while helping Mrs. Kirkpatrick to her feet. “I have a place for you, at least for a while. Let me get your bags. I’ll be in the caretaker’s house,” I said over my shoulder to Jay. “Check on Scotty soon, will you?”

Mr. Kirkpatrick said angrily, “When do we eat? You all know, don’t you, a bad, bad early blizzard is coming.”

~

And so in cooking lunch for the Kirkpatricks, I discovered the neat, wrapped packets of flesh in Peterson’s freezer, each packet labeled with a person’s name. After I recovered from the initial shock, I made a vegetarian dish and helped the elderly couple settle in. I couldn’t save my dear parents, nor could I prevent Peterson from dehydrating poor Ane to death, but even if this weird old couple never realizes it or cares, we saved their lives.

My next major problem was telling Jay what meat might have been in Peterson’s delicious Danish ham stew.

END

Leaving Roanoke Island

Good kids, Harold Stumbo thought.

He nodded goodbye to the female FBI agent in the Jeep Cherokee as it swung around in his white gravel driveway, and he caught a glint from his neighbor's house across the pasture. Probably the rascal was watching through binoculars, hoping his new friends would be escorting Harold away in handcuffs.

The agents were investigating violent mob activity and found him inadvertently. Even though he had retired, they asked to see tax returns for the past five years. Well, he didn't have any of those, did he? Check account statements? Well, he didn't have a checking account, either. Never did. He wasn't lying because you never lie to the FBI—that's a crime they'll nail you with in a heartbeat. So that he could recall what he had said to them, he had recorded the entire interview.

Harold waved toward the Jeep now passed from sight, flipped a bird in the direction of the neighbor, stepped inside the front door, and lifted a daypack stuffed with envelopes.

The agents would return later with a search warrant and probably an indictment for tax evasion. It'd be a quick search because he kept no written records whatsoever, and anyhow, he wouldn't be here. They couldn't give a damn about his career illegal bookmaking on horse racing and other sports. The government only wanted their tax money, plus interest and penalties, and they'd imprison him for longer than he'd live.

The boy, leading his own horse, Jasper, approached from Harold's barn. "Okay, Mr. Stumbo, I'm ready for the envelopes."

"You're not riding your bicycle?"

"Pony express."

Harold laughed too loud. He'd desperately miss the boy who had been helping him and his wife around their gentleman's farm for the past two years, ever since the hurricane devastated the island. "I posted a letter to your dad yesterday, certified mail. It's your gift from Norma Jean and me."

"Thank you."

"It entails responsibility."

The boy wouldn't find out until Harold and his wife were well on the way to a cabin in eastern Kentucky, in a hollow up a slate-paved creek doubling as road. They were giving him the entire Roanoke Island farm, including the house, barns, and twenty-one acres. Norma Jean had reminded Harold over breakfast this morning that, because they were childless, a year ago they deeded the property to the boy in a

trust, anticipating when the government someday might attempt to seize their assets.

"You're taking the thoroughbreds?" the boy asked, following with a quick grin, not able to conceal his excitement that the stallion, mare, and their colt might be his.

"You'll have to wait." Harold evaded because he didn't want a scene. No happy dances, cheers, or blubbering. No awkward words, please. "Start with my neighbor. His letter says I'm giving him the power tools and lumber for his silly woodworking projects. It doesn't say I hope they'll make him feel guilty."

"You're giving away everything?"

"Almost."

"You won't ever be back," the boy said, his voice quivering. He dropped Jasper's reins and marched up the steps toward Harold like he might hug him. Norma Jean pushed open the screen door, rescuing Harold by taking the hug herself and sniffing like she expected to sneeze. The boy lurched to try again to hug Harold, who thrust out the daypack for a barrier.

Harold cleared his throat, but couldn't say anything.

The boy slipped on the pack, pounded down the steps, and leaped up into the saddle. Jasper fidgeted and they trotted off toward Neighbor Guy, who crept outside to meet them. Yep, the neighbor—what's his face—had been watching.

"Is the Land Cruiser loaded?" Harold asked Norma Jean.

"Last night. I told you, already."

"My Alzheimer's?"

She bobbed her head.

"How many years have we lived here?"

"Umm… Eighteen."

"Well, say goodbye to the place."

He wrapped his arm around hers and they strolled to the garage. He hit the remote key button and the door rumbled open. As they drove out, his neighbor was looking down, distracted with skimming his letter, and the boy had already ridden away. Harold turned left from the driveway onto the highway access road. Norma Jean opened up her romance paperback, and Harold put some Old Time music on the radio.

"How will we survive, Jimmy?" Norma Jean asked after a few minutes. "You'll have to work again. Can I call you Jimmy now, Mr. Gant?"

"If I can call you Marilyn."

Her face brightened with an unexpected smile, reminding Harold of when she was young and pretty.

"It won't be easy," she said. "We haven't gone by our real names

since we were married. Umm… It's simple not to lie when you don't remember anything. If you're working again, I need to help. I'm good with faces and math."

"You *are* good with them, and directions. Put the book down and look at your map, so we don't get lost."

"I will. By the way, Jimmy, my real name isn't Marilyn, either."

Harold drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "Please jog my memory, dear."

END

Denying the Signs

Vehicles inched forward, barely leaving enough room for Harold Stumbo to swing his crew-cab pickup through the gap in the guardrail. The four-horse trailer loaded with the thoroughbreds and hay followed dutifully in the U-turn.

Riding shotgun, Norma Jean glanced up from her paperback romance, sighed and said, "It's nice. We're free of the traffic jam, but now we're going *back* to Roanoke Island."

Raiden, Harold's teenage helper around the farm, spoke from the heap of luggage and sleeping bags piled on him in the rear seat. "I never *wanted* to evacuate."

"A Category-3 hurricane is terrifying. Your parents won't be happy we're turning around."

"*They're* not leaving the island."

No one else was driving in the lanes leading back toward the long bridge that crossed the Croatan Sound, and Harold felt relieved to be moving again, even if toward a potential catastrophe. His life had always been this way. Whenever things seemed easy, he paid a high price. Only when plodding ahead did he accomplish anything worthwhile. Still, the frozen inland-bound evacuation traffic might never clear. Probably there'd been an accident.

Harold leaned down to see the upper sky through the windshield. Grey, torn clouds soared southward, just then flinging another blinding rain shower at them. He switched on the hopeless wipers.

"Why didn't we just travel inland in the free lanes?" Raiden asked. "Instead of return."

Harold pulled to the shoulder and stopped. "Why didn't you suggest this earlier?"

"I figured you forgot something. Left something behind."

Harold looked at Norma Jean who seemed absorbed in her novel. The rain ceased and he opened the door of the pickup. "I'll be a minute." He climbed over the guardrail and slid-walked down the embankment to a cluster of trees, their leaves rattling in the stiff breezes. He needed to empty his bladder, but really, he needed to think. He didn't know why he had started back to the island. It didn't make any sense, and it scared him. Was this the first hint of Alzheimer's?

When he reached the pickup truck, the glittering blue lights of a State Trooper were approaching, the cruiser leading bumper-to-bumper lines of cars, vans, and trucks on the wrong side of the road away from the impending storm.

"Uh, oh," Raiden said. "We're trapped."

A few minutes later another trooper pulled up. “Mayor Stumbo, sir. Are you all right? We met at the All Outer Banks 10k last weekend.”

“Officer Melton,” Harold said, reading from the name badge. “Good, good to see you again. We’re headed to… To, ah… I thought I’d give Emergency Management a hand as the hurricane makes its landfall.”

The officer frowned at Harold and glanced toward the horse trailer, which had shifted in a sudden gust of side wind. “Are you sure, sir?”

Harold nodded. “Of course.”

“Let me turn around and I’ll guide you back to Manteo on the shoulder. The bridge may be vacant by the time we arrive, so you should be able to cross.”

“*This* will be exciting,” Raiden said, the tone of his voice loaded with ominous irony.

END

Dreaming is Believing

Starlight illuminated the crests and jumble of the rushing, crashing waves. Rob's team members glided like wisps of black fog toward the campfires among the palm trees ahead. He lay down his M4, unsaddled himself from the ammo cases, waded into the surf, and dove into an oncoming wave, striking out for a fishing boat that he'd persuade to take him to a lovely, lush island that was to be his extraction point. The immersive freshness of the water woke him.

"How was your nap, honey?"

Rob lifted his head and glanced at the nurse's-aid. By her voice and rounded figure, he was sure it was Josie. She knelt beside him and spoke from no more than a foot from his face. "Would you like some orange juice?"

He nodded, and she adjusted a tray over him and brought the straw to his mouth.

"They're giving you your Medal of Honor today," she said, moving to the computer monitor on its stand. "It's about time. Everyone at the Center is excited. I've ironed your uniform. What's wrong with this thing? Some kind of war footage here."

Rob grunted. He'd just as soon not have a ceremony. He had refused to travel to the White House, so it was coming here. Excited? Maybe so, but it was tough for people to see a 26-year-old Navy SEAL who had been half blasted away when a Marine outpost had been overrun. He had returned accurate, lethal fire as he dodged from rock to rock and rescued four injured comrades before the RPG hit him.

~

Gunfire echoed from the valley, with discordant screams syncopating against the roars. Rob raised his binoculars. Men were dragging a girl into a house. She broke free, clutching around her body what now were rags. Rob scanned the field uphill from the house. It could be a farmer harvesting his crop, but the implement was a long, thin knife, and the harvest, a child. Rob turned toward the mountain, dropped his weapon and ammo as before, lifted the medal on its ribbon over his head, and tossed it to the turf. His limbs may be paralyzed in the waking world, but here he'd make full use of them. It felt good walking, stretching his legs, swinging his arms, sucking in the pure air. He climbed until he left the conifer trees behind, and the terrain flourished in lichen-covered rocks and scarlet, white, and sky-blue wildflowers.

He awoke in his wheelchair, the scent of the flowers staying with him, and then he remembered it was the perfume of the photographer from his hometown newspaper, a young woman who he was pretty sure

was now staring dumbfounded toward her camera's view screen.

"What's… the problem?" Rob asked.

Rob's former team members in full dress uniform, the Vice President, his Secret Service agents, Congressman Samuels, and a small crowd had all left the conference room, now empty except for the two of them.

"What's wrong… missy?" Rob asked again.

She—the only civilian journalist invited to the ceremony—held her camera so Rob could see. At first, he thought he was watching a super-realistic video game, but it seemed like it was his last dream.

"My camera's storage is loaded with this horrible, violent crap. It didn't save any pictures of the ceremony. And I can't take anything now, until I delete this, but I had to look first."

"You got… headphones?"

She rummaged in her bag, found the requisite equipment, and plugged Rob in as fuzzy wildflowers, rocks, and a cloud-populated sky came into view. Rob closed his eyes and listened to the birds flitting and chirping in the high scrub. He took a deep breath of the bracing air, but the fierce beating of a helo's blades startled him into consciousness.

"Get this off," he said, shaking his head, the tears he held back during the ceremony now gushing forth. In removing the headphones, her warm hand brushed his scar-hardened cheek. A caress? An accident? Rob didn't catch if she was wearing a wedding ring.

"With my brain damage… it's hard staying awake," he said, pausing and speaking slowly to control the slurring, "so, you'll have to hang around only a short bit longer. I don't think you will get any pictures of me, but you'll capture some cool action from my POV."

"Really?" She picked up from a table the framed portrait of his once handsome, indestructible self, made after he graduated from BUD/S training. "May I borrow this for my story?"

He concentrated his focus on her. He guessed she was in her early 30s, and not with any beauty that would command an intact, ambulatory man's attention. "Delete your files and make space," he said. "Your camera might… have imprinted a real mission somewhere in the world. It might be in our own country, or not… but during my next snooze, if I can, I'm not… escaping into fantasy. Not anymore. I'm wearing… the Medal of Honor and kicking bad-guy ass."

She didn't speak, and Rob knew she didn't exactly believe him.

"Well, just wait… a little while longer, okay?"

"I'm not in a big hurry," she said with a wistful smile. "I missed my deadline a long, long time ago. Shall we go for a walk? Can I get you anything?"

END

PHOTO BY EDITH HUNT

Ships Passing in the Night: Romance and Marriage between Lovers from Anti-synchronous Worlds

An essay by Specialist Estaugh Johnten, as provided by Mickey Hunt

A frozen image of the park's playfield looks somewhat like an ordinary playfield on Earth. Families are sitting on blankets with their picnics, a canine is poised in the air as he clamps his teeth on a flying disk, a woman is jogging down the path between a row of shade trees. Children dash through a play castle with its hanging bridges and polymer towers. All this would look ordinary, except the colors in the image are antipodal like in an old-fashion film negative. What might be shadow emanates light, and it all incandesces with a lustrous glow.

An expectant crowd has gathered at the edge of a field, and upon closer inspection, you'd see that the postures and faces droop with sadness. They are faces possessing delicate contours no race of Earth ever had.

Even stranger would be watching the film in forward motion, because everything actually moves opposite to what you expect: the people, the leaves on the trees, even the sounds of voices.

I myself am walking backwards, with my arm around the waist of a wife I've never met, and a charming child of mine with her arm wrapped around my neck. My wife is carrying my field notebook. I'm elated, and of course completely bewildered. As we walk in reverse toward the waiting crowd, I nearly stumble, because I can't see where we're going.

Children are playing a game nearby. One girl runs backwards and stoops to leave a small white ball on the ground. As we pass, the ball springs up of its own accord and smacks me in the nose. It hurts…

Welcome to the planet Lumen.

The above scenario describes my personal first minutes after I stepped to the ground of a planet circling the first dark star[1] we've ever discovered and located within a vast region of dark matter. It's a planet, indeed a whole region of space, where physics on its most rudimentary level, and, perhaps even time itself, moves opposite to ours.

Earth Command had engaged me on this exploratory mission for the remote possibility of encountering sentient beings on other worlds. While I have studied astrophysics as a hobby, my true expertise was in anthropology. My job was to catalog and analyze sentient alien cultural practices. Little did anyone guess that I would arrive on this new planet already "knowing" a great deal about life there. It was a knowledge that

sprang into existence as events occurred. Of all our team members on the mission, I was the only one who could fully wrap his brain around how things worked. My Earth-based supervisors believe it was my Asperger's Syndrome that enabled me to adapt to the confusing environment. What had isolated me from other people in normal time allowed me to better fit in on Lumen. Plus, I had already developed attitudes and techniques to help me compensate for my misperceptions.

~

When our research ship *Radiant* first approached Lumen, we entered a high slow orbit above the nightside. The view from my port window showed the surface to be dark, that is, with no lights to indicate any sort of advanced civilization. I wrote in my field notebook, "Another lonely silent sphere, like me." Only when the ship orbited to the dayside of the planet did our scouting telescopes show living beings with a technology similar to 20th century Earth; that is, they had self-propelled transport craft, including flying vessels. As I gazed from the window, a weird cluster of rocks about a kilometer or so from us flew away from the planet. I didn't learn until later that they were meteors falling *toward* the planet.

During Landing Orientation, I arrived late and took the remaining empty seat in the front row. Captain Therreal[2] remarked that it was strange the inhabitants hadn't responded to our attempts to contact them by radio.

At that time, Communications Officer Esang interrupted to shrilly announce that Lumen was being bombarded by messages from space, including one from a woman who cried in inverted English, "Please come back, we need you!" This was all a mystery that we resolved only later.

As we landed the transport shuttle on the surface for the first time ever, Assistant Safety Officer Sanderson was in charge of making one last check to the atmosphere's compatibility with human physiology. The composition of Lumen's air was roughly identical to Earth's, except in the motion of the elements' atoms. Sanderson reported the air was "okay," and as we waited for the transport's integument door to open, she noticed that I was clutching my notebook to my chest.

"Eager today, Professor?" she asked.

Suddenly self-aware and chagrined about looking like a schoolgirl, I nonchalantly lowered the notebook to my side. No matter how many times I corrected her, she always called me professor.

"I'm just messing with you," she said.

Oh. I realized then she was only teasing, but her use of "mess" reminded me of an archaic meaning of the term, that of a sailing ship's dining hall. This seemed like a natural segue, so I asked her if she

would join me for dinner sometime.

She only grimaced and shook her head.

I suppose the universe wreaked its revenge when the door opened and flooded the compartment with the native air. Sanderson hyperventilated and passed out cold. The door buzzed and slammed shut, and medics evacuated her to a berth in the shuttle where she soon recovered. As it turned out, Sanderson never could process Lumen's air, and further research showed that approximately 5.5% of the *Radiant's* crew couldn't. For them, the oxygen was totally inert and unreactive, and they were compelled to wear breathing apparatus and tanks whenever they spent time on the planet, a situation which was a burden. Also, as it turned out, Sanderson grew to respect me, and we became friends. She was a medical doctor, and I invited her to attend the birth of my daughter, a story I will return to later.

When the landing team shuffled down the ramp, I among them, the scene before us appeared as a blazing impressionistic painting of a New England landscape. Figures approached from the crowd. They appeared blurry until they drew near, and I realized with a shock that they were walking in reverse. A person turned to me, and now I saw it was a young woman. She held a baby on her hip, a little girl almost a year old grasping her mother's blouse. The young mother's luminescent skin, garments, and facial features gave her a certain beauty I never imagined possible.

Her baby. She reminded me of photographs of my own mother when she was a child.

The woman stepped toward me and kissed me lingeringly on the mouth—her lips cool to the touch—and when she stepped back she held a garland of flowers in her free hand. A memory burst into existence, a memory telling me the sweet smelling lei had hung around my neck only seconds before. How was this happening? She spoke to me in a familiar, bizarre, inverted language.

As other crewmembers were greeted with similar, albeit less intimate farewells from the indigenous people, I felt myself swept up in astonished awareness that we and they existed within the same reality and were passing in converse directions–my future being the young woman's past, and my past being her future.

So that's when I realized the mysterious radio message had been for me, and the immense throng of people at the landing site had gathered to say goodbye.

My first impulse was to sprint back to the transport and hide in a locker, but for once in my awkward life, when everything was infinitely awkward, I knew what to do. I held my ground and began writing on my field notebook. The young woman lifted the garland to her nose and

breathed in. She smiled like gentle sunlight, wiped her eyes, sniffed twice, and nodded with comprehension as droplets leapt from the ground, rolled up her cheeks, and squeezed into her tear ducts.

I finished writing and held up the notebook so she could read my words, I love you and our baby very, very much. I promise, we will be together again.

I swapped my notebook for our child who snuggled her face against my chest. And I had no idea how it all would work, but clearly, we had already solved certain future problems of cross-cultural interaction—I had a family!

~

Is time real, or was it simply that the physics of Lumen moved backward, even at the quantum level? Is it that subatomic particles like electrons were just spinning in reverse to ours?

Up until we encountered Lumen, what we found there and in the planet's spatial neighborhood would have been described as being composed of Diroc's Antimatter.[3] However, the only antimatter we've known before has been in laboratories. We've never experienced antienergy before, not what was recognized as such. In artificial, simplistic experiments, whenever matter and antimatter touched one another, they were annihilated. But the stable presence within our galaxy of antispace and all it contains, and our safe interaction with Lumen, proves that matter and natural antimatter coexist, which brought up the possibility that our previous theories have been all wrong.

Dr. Pachero-Nanez, the first scientist to clarify and popularize the idea that time was not real, claimed that time is only a human construct that measures relative rates of change. Pachero-Nanez helped us understand that Einstein's theory of relativity wasn't as profound as once thought, because it only meant that time seems to flow differently because of an observer's relative *position* to the light by which we perceive events. That is true, but our experience on Lumen proved Pachero-Nanez wrong about the existence of time itself.[4]

Why? Because my life with Ahtebazille existed before it had even happened from my perspective, we learned that time itself was a singular entity of its own. Time is real. And yet what happened was completely dependent on our decisions in that moving present that we shared together, a present something like the juncture of two streams when they form a river. The streams merge, mixing and churning, and continue on with both changed.

Events occurring in that present changed my past and created their own memories. As I already wrote, when Ahtebazille greeted me, she hung a lei around my neck as a parting gift. Until she took that action, it never happened for me, but when it happened, that lei continued to be

around my neck in her future and in my past, and that's why I remembered it.

My two and a half years on Lumen was full of such experiences, but the confusion and the continuous reshaping of my memory were only part of the difficulty.

~

Most people of Lumen were sad when we arrived, and sadness often pervaded my mood as well, because I knew I had such a brief period ahead to be a father and a husband. Our daughter Atte'eerneh was growing younger each day, and in a few months her contraction of size and abilities alarmed and grieved me. I knew what the inevitable would be. It was exactly like having a child with a terminal illness, but there was no treatment, cure, or hope of recovery. Her birth then was like a death, or at least a vanishing. I saw her slip into her mother's body, and then observed as Ahtebazille's belly shrank month by month, and I couldn't forget our daughter as she had been: happy, scampering around our house (backwards of course), playing with dolls and singing nonsense songs. I was so sorrowful in thinking that I couldn't know her at a period later in her life. Adding to the sorrow, when I arrived on Lumen, Ahtebazille was pregnant with our second child, a boy.

I had to force myself to not think about this.

~

For an example of a milder difficulty, as it turned out, arriving late to social events was essential on Lumen. In fact, to be early you had to arrive after an occasion was completely over, or you would be too late. By the time of Ahtebazille's and my wedding I had it figured out. Because, of course, from my point of view, the wedding ceremony began at the end and worked backwards to the beginning. In fact, our last ever "connubial celebration" took place on the night *before* the wedding.

Whenever I speak at holo-seminars and conferences, the questions most frequently asked are about sex. Everyone wants to know how to "make a baby" on Lumen. I've written about it in impersonal clinical detail in my paper "From Coitus to Foreplay: Sexual Relations Between Intraspecies Partners of Reverse Time Ecosystems,"[5] but it's enough to say in this present article that the process is far easier than one might imagine. As I have understood from the wide study of cultures, intimate relations between the opposite sexes are fraught with awkwardness, blunders, embarrassment, misunderstandings, and even humor, obstacles often easily overcome in a loving relationship. When the respective time streams of the partners are opposed, those factors are compounded. But as with everything on Lumen, I was always surprised how well it worked out when we just relaxed and let what might happen, happen.

~

The same as with our daughter undeveloping until the point of when her life began at fertilization, so my relationship with my wife Ahtebazille diminished over time. I knew her better, but she knew me less. She seemed to have forgotten my favorite foods. Her cooking deteriorated. After the year and more of enjoying our marriage bed, the strictly enforced chastity was a sore trial for me. Her parents stopped liking me, saying that a close relationship between their daughter and me was impossible. She comprehended what I said less.[6] Beyond when we first met (from her point of view) one evening at a square dance, I was a stranger to her, but I knew her better than ever, the situation being a mirror to when I arrived and first saw her. So, as we knew it would, my wife didn't know me anymore. Think of it like severe Alzheimer's, except she was young and healthy in every way, making the "memory loss" all the more painful.

~

Though we had been among the Lumens for a long while, they acted cold, cautious, and afraid, as if we had just arrived. When we actually had arrived, we were clumsy. Now they were, and you had to be on a continuous lookout for unexpected hazards, like being run over while crossing the street.[7] I myself was nearly killed by an ice cream truck roaring around a corner.

So, there was no longer any joy in staying, and after 30 full months of living on the planet, deeply involved in the affairs of its people, we lifted off for the last time, with me feeling even more alone than I have in my whole life.

~

That was eight months ago, and soon after my arrival on Earth, I ran into my old friend Mickey Hunt[8] at my favorite tea cafe. Mickey had been an obscure social reformer back in the 21st century and took up writing faux science fiction and fantasy in his retirement. I say faux, because the science and fantasy were really real. Captain Therreal had run across an actual copy of Mickey's early novel in a museum and went back to meet him. Therreal ended up inviting him on a time transcendence journey, but now after extensively roaming across Earth's eras, Mickey planned to return home to his own time. When he heard about my family on Lumen, and my heartbreak over how empty my current life was, he asked me to join him aboard the UNSS *Chariot* for the acceleration to light speed, a voyage that would last a whole year. He said he'd make room for me in his quarters.

"Really, you'd take me along?" I said. "Only a select few go on these expeditions."

"You'll be my guest," he said. "Here's what you do: when we

break the light barrier, we leave the material-energy-chronos universe and enter what's called eternity. You know, 'God is light.' It's like dying, except you're not dead. It's being totally awake. In the dream world, your powers of thought and action are limited. Your mind floats along, flitting here and there, and you have negligible control over imaginary actions within the dream. Your body is all but immobile and paralyzed in bed. Consider that the supernatural world is to the natural world what the waking world is to the dream world. In the supernatural, you have incomparably more freedom and control over your mind and body than you do in your ordinary existence. You can go anywhere and anywhen you like." He paused to let this sink in, and then repeated, "Anywhere and when. It's the only way to travel anymore. Time and space transcendence."

A warm flush suffused my whole being, and the gloomy cloud that enveloped my head vanished entirely. I pulled out my field notebook and began scribbling my packing list.

Mickey said, "Why don't you tell me what you're thinking?"

I told him what, and that's my plan for the future.

Calculating my life expectancy, I intend to arrive back on Lumen so that I might possibly live until a few months *before* I arrived the first time. That will give me another 40-50 years with Ahtebazille and my children.

"Don't forget the grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and so on," Mickey said. "You may be surprised at the multitude of descendants you have. I was when I peeked ahead, and knowing about them is why I never feel lonesome."

My enthusiasm suddenly fell away, and I closed my notebook. "I just thought of it. When I rejoin my wife, for her it will be parting all over again. She'll be old, maybe even dead."

"Can't be helped," Mickey said. "You've got to go."

He's right. And I will go.

END NOTES:

[1] A dark star is a black hole in particular effects, but much lower in mass.

[2] This is the same Therreal who commanded the starship *Chariot* in the first intentional time-transcendence excursions based on the theories of Nobel Prize-winning propulsionist, Dr. Pachero-Nanez, who discovered that as a vessel neared the speed of light, its mass decreased, enabling it to break the light barrier and escape the limitations of the material-energy-chronos universe.

[3] Paul Adrien Maurice Dirac, 8 August 1902–20 October 1984.

[4] Pachero-Nanez was wrong in other things as well, namely his Na-

tional Socialist politics.

[5] Originally published in the *Journal of Chaotic Terrain*, Vol. 3849, Issue 3, Year Indeterminate.

[6] I had taught her English and I, in turn, had to learn to speak and understand it backwards.

[7] I never quite learned to safely drive on Lumen.

[8] Not his real name.

END

Estaugh A. Johnten grew up on a farm in Pennsylvania and earned a B.A. in Social/Cultural Anthropology at Templetown University. He received a Fulhaus/DAD Fellowship for the Eberhard-Hostleter-Universität in Tübingen, Germany, where he subsequently completed an M.A. His work with the extraordinary voyage of the USS *Radiant* was funded through a grant from the International Academies of Sciences, Medicine, and Engineering. When defending his Ph.D. dissertation at Hahvad University just prior to his departure from regular time, he told the examination committee to "Jump in the lake."

Mickey Hunt explores the universe from his base in Asheville, North Carolina. His reports disguised as fiction have appeared in the Literary Hatchet, AntipodeanSF, the Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, the Dark Mountain anthology, and elsewhere. Readers may learn more at **chaoticterrainpress.blogspot.com**.

Skirmishing for Food

Matt limped to the kitchen sink, filled a glass with water, and drank it down.

He slid the window curtains open, and a tiny speck streaking between the crusty, smeary dishes caught his eye. The speck was but one ant in an endless string of frenetic two-way activity. Ants met each other head-on, paused to visit, and rushed away. Matt reached out to squish the foragers, to rub them into a film of reeking, acrid fear when thumping sounds from the back steps diverted him.

The door opened.

"Julie!" he said. He gazed with trembling enthusiasm at the lumpy plastic bags hanging from each of her hands.

She plunked them onto the floor. "Incredible. Three decent cauliflower heads, 40 pounds of sprouted sweet potatoes strapped on my bicycle, a dozen mushy organic bell peppers, bagels, and hey, look at this." She fished in a bag and held up a grey triangular block.

"Oh, my gosh," Matt said. "Cheese!"

"*Parmigiano Reggiano*."

Matt sniffed the block and smiled.

"It's rock hard, but basically edible."

"Yay. We are feasting this morning. You know I would have gone with you if I hadn't been warned last week. Next time I might be arrested."

"You mean if you hadn't sprained your ankle and called an ambulance. When I was inside the dumpster at O'Tingles, a police cruiser glided around the corner, and I didn't duck fast enough. He flashed his beam, rolled down his window, and said, 'I'm aware you're in there. Be careful.' And then he left."

"He left?"

"Right."

"Nice."

"Hey, clear a spot. I need to rinse the plunder."

Matt shifted stacks of dishes while Julie glared at the insects crawling across the counter or dashing for cover. "Piss ants, again," she said fervently. "Destroy them. I want you to, now. That's *your* job."

Breathing slowly through his mouth he watched the busy raiders. He could taste the garbage can odor still clinging to Julie's clothing. Inside one bowl a hundred minuscule ants had circled the dried dal bhat remnants. He moaned to himself. "They're harmless, really. It's good sharing our space with these creatures."

"So, you won't kill them?"

"No, I won't. They have a unique place in the cosmos."

"And what's that?"

"They, they clean up."

"They clean up?" She sighed. "At least wash the stupid dishes, okay?"

"Fine, fine. You take a shower. Then I'll give you a hug, and we'll cook breakfast."

END

Extras

1. The Gingerbread Puppet Boy

I wrote this story some 46 years ago in a creative writing class at Berea College when I was a student there. Each of us was asked to write three sentences to begin the best short story ever, and then we traded our beginnings. I read my story aloud in class and the students applauded at the end. I revised the story for the Gingerbread Festival in Knott County, Kentucky, and it was published in the *Troublesome Creek Times* in 1983. I have since revised it again, though I maintained its 1970s setting. At a present-day Greyhound terminal, a TV would be playing CNN news, which would be showing live shots of the action. In my early twenties, I was a puppeteer with the Tears of Joy Puppet Theatre based in Vancouver, Washington, so the story was built on my experiences. We performed at colleges, parks, and churches. The story was again revised and accepted for Wayman Publishing's anthology *Open Doors: Fractured Fairy Tales*, published in 2012. Proceeds went to a children's hospital in Utah. Wayman produced an audio version of the anthology with a professional actor who read with a fake English accent that was hilariously incongruous.

The photo is of Christmas tree decorations against our woodpile.

2. Arrangements

I wrote this with a local retail nursery business in mind—BB Barnes—and a girl in our community who was trying to grow native plants commercially. I handed out the first five paragraphs of the story on a 1/3rd page flyer at a "gay marriage" WE DO rally downtown Asheville until I was surrounded by leaders of the rally, including a present Buncombe County Commissioner-elect, who grabbed my arms and snatched the flyers from my hand and from those who took it. This was in a yard and parking lot of a "Church of Christ." The male "reverend" ordered me off the property in the presence of an out-of-uniform Buncombe County sheriff's deputy who gave me five seconds to agree to leave the property, which I did. The deputy must have been a participant in the rally, and later I found out he was not a patrol officer, but the jail administrator. Then later on, I tried the same thing at a transgender bathroom rally and again met with hostility—just five paragraphs. None of this reflects on the story, however, but it was my attempt at literary activism.

The photo is wildflowers in a wilderness area east of Leadville, CO.

3. Miss Thurman's Intervention

Our son Peter did yard work for a lady who he told that he wouldn't help her anymore unless she allowed him to help her clean up her house, and so the story grew from this situation. I named Barry for Berry's Farm

Supply in Swannanoa, one of my favorite places for hard-to-find items. They once, in fact, had some maggot-infested hams hanging on the wall and for sale. My grandfather's first name was Thurman. We called him Tim. The photo was taken inside a local Ingles store.

4. The Shoreless Ocean of Eternity

This story had its beginnings on our family Sunday afternoon excursions on the Blue Ridge Parkway when we'd all do some creative thinking during the drive, making up things as we went. I named the main character—the hero—after a Transylvania University history professor who yelled, "It's an outrage!" at me once at the top of his voice during our Genocide Awareness Project on campus. Everyone in the vicinity looked at us. After he yelled, I said quietly, "I understand that you teach a course on the Holocaust. I was wondering if I may have a course outline." He went and got me one.

I've posted more speculative material about "Eternity" on my blog.

The photo is of a scene in Maine, looking north.

5. When Earth Whispers (jtb 3)

This story is third in the Jonathan T. Barron series timeline, but it was written first and is great to read first. JTB as a name, is a purposeful imitation of the name of a local paranormal investigator/entertainer Joshua P. Warren. I wrote the first notes on this story in a motel room near the campus of Liberty University, in Lynchburg, VA. The story of the woman who died from illegal abortion is true. I found accounts of it in the Asheville *Citizen* newspaper's microfiche in the Pack Memorial Library. The parking lot is that of West Asheville Baptist Church on Haywood Road. Lynchville really is Asheville, but it also is the former name of San Ramon, California. The fictional destroyed office building was located at 900 Hendersonville Road, a former real abortion site. "When Earth Whispers" and the other three JTB stories each received Honorable Mentions in the Writers of the Future Contest.

The title of the story is based on the concept contained in the line, "Listen, your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground" from Genesis, chapter 4. When the Earth whispers, mountains fall into the sea.

The photo is of a leafcutter bee on goldenrod, following my theme of "complexity in smallness." Taken on the Blue Ridge Parkway in 9/2014.

6. Guest Lecture

I was once a fan of the AMC series, The Walking Dead. Having been on many college and university campuses, I witnessed students playing the action game Humans v. Zombies several times. The photo was taken at the University of South Dakota.

7. Not the Wrong Planet

Penumbra, which published the story in November, 2013, paid me a near-professional rate, which I used to buy my wife the PBS Ken Burns documentary on the Roosevelts. *Penumbra* and the parent company Musa promptly went out of business. *AntipodeanSF,* based in Australia, then published the story online and broadcasted a radio version made with my voice. That podcast is still available online in some sort of official Australian archives. Later, I wrote an extended first-person version of NtWP titled "Ships Passing in the Night: Romance and Marriage between Lovers from Anti-synchronous Worlds." Here's material I posted on my blog, www.chaoticterrainpress.blogspot.com:

> First, I should warn you that this little essay contains spoilers.
>
> Per word, I've spent more time on "Not the Wrong Planet" (NtWP) than any other story I've written. Time spent includes several prior submissions, many miscellaneous communications, and countless revisions. If I recall correctly, before I wrote anything, I thought about the concept for a whole week. Next, I wrote out a detailed sketch. Originally, I had in mind a full-length short story, or even a novelette, but then I realized not only how hard this would be, but in reality, it might not even be necessary. The story is strong as is.
>
> **Okay. Spoilers.**
> The idea of time reversal was mind-bending. Not things working backward so much, but how events moving backwards intersected with events simultaneously working forwards, like for example when Johnten writes his love message on his field notebook, I depicted his wife's reaction before she even saw the note from his perspective. Confusing? Yes. I made diagrams with the specific happenings of the story, which helped.
>
> Only in a few moments of imagination did I conceive of how they made a baby. Really, I didn't even try too hard. For their wedding, Johnten would need to arrive after or at the end, or he'd be late. I pictured him walking across a playfield and a ball leaping from the ground and hitting him in the head as he passed between it and the thrower. If you thought the films "Inception" (2010) and "Memento" (2000) were disorienting…
>
> **So, my time theory.**
> Time isn't real; it's only a human construct that measures relative rates of change. It relates to the speed of light because we can only perceive events by means of light, or of things slower. Okay, then, if so, time is a mere function of physics. For the story, I pictured a region of space where physics works in reverse. The spins of electrons just spin opposite of how they do for us. I'm not a physicist, but this might be called anti-matter. Ordinarily, when anti-matter and matter interact, both are destroyed, or so I believe.
>
> Dark matter. Dark star. In the story, they really aren't dark, it's just that all the light is moving toward the dark matter and dark stars instead of away. If things appear to be luminescent, they do because light appears to

emanate, but really is moving, from Johnten's perspective, from a person or object *back* to the source. Now that I think about it, even people from Earth would be luminous.

I really wanted the events to be unfolding only in "the present" of the story, but then there wouldn't be a baby; so I fudged, and for that aspect abandoned my "time is not real" idea. Maybe you noticed. I left the question (of time having a substance or of physics moving backwards) up in the air. Could be just physics, or not. Johnten doesn't know yet.

A poignant part of the story is that as Johnten lives with his wife and integrates somehow into this impossible world, their child will grow younger and younger, eventually be born in reverse and enter the womb, and then undevelop until, for all intents and purposes, she ceases to exist except in his memory. At some point, Johnten's wife will not recognize him, like he did not recognize her at first. Does he eventually leave Lumen? I don't know. (Read my story "Ships Passing in the Night."

Memories.
Once an event has happened in the emergent present, it creates a memory that did not exist prior to the event. I showed only a couple instances, one being about the lei, but I leave you to work through any others, if you wish. Think of how an event happening in the present stirs up ripples that move ahead in time. Well, in this world, with Johnten and his so-far unnamed wife, events stir up ripples that move backward in time, at least for the other observer.

The title.
From the beginning, I had the idea that the main character would be awkward, but in a world like Lumen, it might be an advantage. Maybe Johnten's awkwardness was just made-to-order for this reverse world, that he of all the people from normal time/physics, had the right genes that enabled him to adjust. Then I wondered exactly what condition he might have. I looked into Asperger's and found a support website called Wrong Planet. The perspective there is that Asperger's people just happen to be on the wrong planet. It's not they that have problems, it's everything else. I like that. The rest of the story of the title is obvious: for Johnten, Lumen is the Right Planet. Lastly, a thought moving through my mind during much of the early composition of "Not the Wrong Planet" was how these two lovers, Johnten and the girl of Lumen, only could have a brief time together before the universe swept them past each other. Like two ships. Then I remembered the line, just the one line:

"Ships that pass in the night."

I looked up the line in context and found, to my amazement, that the line is from a collection of poems by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow called "Tales of a Wayside Inn" and the specific poem of the whole is "The Theologian's Tale: Elizabeth." The words of the immediate context of the line might seem sad and forlorn, and they are.

Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing,
Only a signal shown and a distant voice in the darkness;
So on the ocean of life we pass and speak one another,

Only a look and a voice, then darkness again and a silence.

They are sad except for the even greater context. Because, after a long voyage, the story finally brings the lover home to his beloved.

Then John Estaugh came back o'er the sea for the offered gift,
Better than houses and lands, the gift of a woman's affection.
And on the First-Day that followed, he rose in the Silent Assembly, Holding in his strong hand a hand that trembled a little,
Promising to be kind and true and faithful in all things.
Such were the marriage-rites of John and Elizabeth Estaugh.

And such were the rites of Johnten and the girl of Lumen.

~

This informal essay above was written for the *Penumbra* blog, but seeing how they may not want it, I'm adding a note below that I did not intend to include for them:

NtWP had a rough time with a particular flash fiction publication, *Splickety*. The editor said he loved it, comparing it to an H.P. Lovecraft cosmic horror story, and said he wanted to publish it. Excellent, I thought. But in the process of copy-editing, we kept hitting inexplicable snags. He wanted me to make changes in the story that made no sense at all. We argued back and forth for a week, and then I finally understood what the problem was. He had misinterpreted the story. In short, he thought it was about a Mirror Earth instead of Reverse Time. When I explained the true nature of the story in plain terms, he wrote back saying that unless I changed it to meet his expectation, he would reject it. Frankly, that made me angry.

I wrote back saying that, while a couple little things needed fixing to prevent readers from traipsing down the Mirror Earth path, the story obviously was Reverse Time and that he hadn't given the story a fair chance to be itself. I asked him if he would give it to another editor for a fresh beginning. He said it was a gutsy request, but agreed, and the new editor and I polished the story to his satisfaction and it went into Hold status. However, just at that time the publication adopted a theme approach, and NtWP didn't fit any of their upcoming themes, so that Hold dragged on and on for months. Since we hadn't signed a contract, I submitted it to *Penumbra* in a slightly longer-than-flash form. Purist flash fiction publications set a firm limit of 1000 words. NtWP is about 1080. Like "Genius", which came out later at *Stupefying Stories*, NtWP really needed those additional words.

Interestingly, before they had given me an acceptance, I had explored withdrawing it from *Penumbra* and submitting it to the Writers of the Future Contest instead. Good thing I didn't.

But back to the publication with which I had the difficulty. For fun, I did that rewrite, making NtWP into a Mirror Earth story. I call it "A Cosmic Mirror," and once *Penumbra's* exclusive rights expire, I might post it here or send it on to that publication. It really does contain a cool idea.

So, the above material was notes I posted on my blog. (9/2025: I have updated them here a little bit.) When you read the extended version of NtWP, the story "Ships Passing in the Night," you'll see that I incorporated many of those ideas.

The cover of the *Penumbra* issue that carried my story is really cool, but I did not include it here. See it on my blog. This photo in the book is a screenshot of a video of a grandson in a swimming pool.

8. I'm Not a Baby Anymore

My neighbor walks his sausage-like, not very bright, British Bulldog up and down our road, a scene that inspired this story. The photo is of the bulldog of other neighbors. We have two of that breed near us.

9. Demon Dragonfly

DD takes place during the early Song Dynasty of Imperial China. The story was rejected for publication 29 times, having received a lot of compliments from editors, and once being a finalist in a big contest. It came close several times to being accepted but never made the final cut. Brother Chen in the story is named after Chen Guangcheng, the blind Chinese dissident who opposed forced abortion and other abuses in the PRC. The photo is of a little plastic thing I found somewhere. The background is the Heavenly Bamboo in front of our house.

10. Deprescience

Except in a crisis, *Every Day Fiction* (EDF) issued a flash fiction story every day, 365 days a year. Flash fiction, as they define it, is a complete story in 1000 words or less. EDF is the first publication I sent this story to, and after two previous rejections, they accepted this version. They had actually rejected "Not the Wrong Planet." One great feature of this publication is that they give every story, rejected or not, anywhere from three to five critiques from first readers and editors. I used the critique for NtWP to make it better.

Below is the letter from EDF's editors, a rewrite request, meaning that they didn't accept "Deprescience" right away. Rewrite requests are rarer than acceptances, in my experience. I condensed the comments into actionable notes to help me keep track of what needed work.

> Dear Mickey Hunt,
>
> Your story "Deprescience" was very close to an acceptance, but there were some slight problems, so we'd like to invite you to take another crack at it.
>
> I liked this. That it was his future and not his past was apparent, but the clairvoyant theory didn't occur to me until the grandmother mentioned it, so things slotted into place at that moment. I did wonder how the grandmother could not recognize her family one minute and know exactly who Timmy was the next, and I see no reason to introduce confu-

sion or memory lapses here. Her physical frailty might possibly be better demonstrated through sleepiness, or difficulty breathing. –**rose gardener**

Some very solid writing for an engaging read. I love the premise, and think the family dynamics portrayed here are great. However, I absolutely agree with Rose that it's too hard to believe his grandmother would ask, "Who are you, again?", then wax into a quick proclamation of Timmy's clairvoyance and how they share that gift. I think this is a solid flash piece, but I'd like to see a smoother, more natural transition into the clairvoyance part. I'm passing this along for another opinion.

–Carol Clark

Interesting story that puts us in an unusual perspective of not knowing if the character is bonkers or if there is something more to his delusions. The prose needs a bit of work in some areas ("During his adolescent years, he howled with weeping" and "He wisped air out of his nose at my absurd question" are just a couple of lines that clang off the ear with an unpleasant dissonance). What I wasn't quite sure of by the end was Timothy's power. He seems to be connecting with some past life, but when we get around to the grandmother reveal, he seems to be seeing the future. I can understand how this might scramble his mind, but it should be a bit easier for the reader to understand.

On a final note, I wondered why the grandmother had withheld what was clearly vital information from Timothy his whole life. Why didn't she explain things early on or otherwise smooth his adolescent path? As a reader, it was a question I found myself wondering about by the end. Without that purpose, the grandmother's reveal comes across as a touch convenient. –**John Towler**

In retrospect, I really like the title (should have tipped me off, in fact!) This idea of lamenting a past when it is actually a future yet to come ends up being automatically inspirational, a real lesson in perspective. That concept is excellent. However, the delivery comes up a bit wanting for me. John has already mentioned some issues. For me, there were a couple rough spots that, if smoothed out, would deliver the message more cleanly (in my opinion). First of all, I would have liked an indication of the root of Tim's depression earlier -- that he was clearly lamenting some sort of delusional loss (rather than generic "he was sad and stared at walls"). Because when the idea his family is gone is introduced over ramen noodles, my mind went in a lot of (wrong) directions: adoption, science fiction, schizophrenia... That detracted from the core plot thread -- that he had visions that he determined were past losses. I'm not exactly sure how to address that, but feel it needs to be (and I deem this author has the skills for it). Basically, a bit more (just ideas):

"In third grade, Timmy told all his teachers he was adopted. By the time sixth grade rolled around, it was aliens abducting his 'real' parents. His delusions led him to a deep depression, no matter how many therapists we took him to see, and his father and I became more and more frustrated."

The other spot that felt quick was the grandmother immediately telling Tim he is clairvoyant. If nothing else, I would have liked that to have been a bit veiled, like, "It's the family gift, Tim, not a curse." The reader

knows what future visions are, and will have read dozens of stories and seen dozens of movies about psychic family attributes. Also, toning down Tim's unabashed sobbing might help. Tim is a powerful character in his dourness and restraint, so it felt off to me that this single revelation turned him into a completely apologetic, hopeful young man. That should be delivered more gently, and you have the perfect opportunity to "show" that beginning -- the mom could see him talking to the nurse and Tim actually smiling as the nurse shows him the book she is reading (or something like that). To put this all another way, this message is wonderful and critical to the story: that which we perceive as loss is actually hope for the future, provided we persevere and do not allow despair to rule our lives. I'd like to see that come through without feeling so sudden and convenient. –**Joseph Kaufman**

We'd love to publish this piece, but we feel these issues need to be tackled. Please let us know ASAP. If you're okay with the rewrite request, please resubmit using our online form and check resubmission box on the story submit page.

Sincerely,
All of us at *Every Day Fiction*
http://www.everydayfiction.com/pages/

Have you read Flash Fiction Chronicles?
http://www.everydayfiction.com/flashfictionblog/
It's a site dedicated to the discussion of the art and craft of flash fiction, fiction in general, and the issues of writing, marketing, and publishing today.

Back to me: They accepted the story after I did a rework. Below is my response to further comments from the editors of EDF.

Thank you for your kind words about my story "Deprescience" and for accepting it for publication.

If I may, I'd like to defend/explain a couple points in the story. But I wish to say first that I'll submit your remarks to my critique group for further input. At this point, I need other eyes to help me. I'll ask the group and I hope to get responses by Monday.

Maybe it is too subtle, but Tim's blinking always precedes a vision, and so his emotional outburst at the end is a response to seeing his past, no, future for the first time with any kind of comprehension. I thought a lot about having Grandma blink too, to clarify, but that seemed too blunt. I did tone his emotion down a little, but it remains essentially an outburst based on my theory that many people who show strong emotional control really have strong emotions that sometimes will overflow. It also refers back to his adolescence when he wailed in misery.

Grandma's explanation, while it seems to tie a bow onto a solution for Tim, does not address the issue of seeing the future imperfectly, or incompletely. Other literature on this subject deals with "seeing through a glass darkly."

At the end of the story, I have Tim's voice catch between a sob and a laugh, and it does seem a little over the top, unless one understands this to be underplayed or "thrown away" by the character. I wanted to add an

adjective such as “gentle” to “laugh”, but it seemed to disrupt the rhythm of a tight wrap, so I refrained. As I act it out, my words that are caught in this way come out pinched and stifled, that is, trapped in the conflict between deep emotion and practiced control. If I have mistaken you, and this part reads fine as is, please let me know. Otherwise, I will look for more perfect words to capture, if possible, the precise effect I need.

Then the last item, Grandma’s words about “self-inflicted” loss, relate to how he might blame himself for his years of misery, loneliness, and social isolation. From personal experience, I know that people get depressed about being depressed. And so even that must be rectified and accepted in some way. Also, his Grandmother is just about to die, and so that’s a real loss that must be dealt with. Her words, for me, anchor a “speculative” story more into real-life experience.

This story actually emerged from my own present stage of life, when our six children are leaving the home. I miss the days when our house was always the busy center of joyful activity. I miss our children when they were little. But I’m having to realize that what are losses are also opportunities for new roles as a grandparent and . . and I’m still discovering what the new roles are.

Late in the writing process, I realized that the dad character needed a name. He is 50 or so years old. I looked at popular boys names given in 1962. Number seven was William. I gave the dad the name Bill as a memorial to Bill O’Hara, who died six years ago as of this writing in 11/16.

What follows here is the original first paragraph of the story.

> When you’re severely depressed, you don’t care enough to describe how you feel, but when you’re not so depressed, you can’t remember how bad you felt. To understand this kind of desolation, you have to observe it up close in other people, which I did with my grandfather who committed suicide and in my mother who endured electroshock treatments, and in our son Timothy.

That whole paragraph is completely autobiographical, except for the part about the son. None of my six children, (as far as I knew back then) had suffered severe depression. My biography later became even more deeply connected to the story, because my father took his own life in April of 2013. I’ve written a creative non-fiction piece that describes all of this. It is titled “Savage,” which is the make of my dad’s hunting rifle. The work is still in progress. I’m not sure if I could ever let others read it.

When “Deprescience” was first published on December 13, 2012, I thought I had launched my writing career. The story was receiving high ratings on the EDF site, and I helped by asking all my friends to read the story and leave comments and, hopefully, four or five stars out of five possible. The highest rated-story for any particular month got an interview in the Flash Fiction Chronicles. My chief competitor was “Distant Thunder” by the flash fiction master Andrew Stancek. My story had the advantage of having been published earlier in the month. His had the advantage of being far more sophisticated, and he much better connected. Here’s what I wrote somewhere about his story:

I've described it as richly written but ending in despair. The story has received high praise from a number of other writers, and it does have a degree of sophistication. What no one has much commented upon so far is that the story contains a strong sense of morality. First, the son betrays his girlfriend by dumping her and chasing someone else, a fellow art student named Anastasia. Then the son is in-turn betrayed in a lurid and caviler way by his father, a person he loves and admires. We never find out if the narrator learns anything from his experience. We do see his natural reaction: an urge to vomit, physical weakness, pain. Even if people do not believe in morality, they cannot escape its effects.

I do not like stories that end in despair. And if the story is "exquisite, superb, beautiful," etc., I like it even less. And if the story is heavily sexual, then the story is repellent as well as alluring. Much better is Tolstoy's discreet approach in *Anna Karenina* where he contrasts Anna and Vronsky, who commit adultery, with Levin and Kitty, who find fulfillment in marriage and a domestic agrarian life. [Note: I repeated this theme in my novel, *Universal Man*.]

The title "Distant Thunder" is a reference to a painting of the same title by Andrew Wyeth. The painting is of his wife, and possibly suggests that the story's narrator has lost the possibility of painting a wife; certainly, it will not be Anastasia. Wyeth secretly painted nudes of Helga, who was married to another person, but I won't try to work out how this relates to the short story.

Maybe I am unrealistic, but I would have ended "Distant Thunder" with the narrator, after time to adjust to his shock, intending to ask his former girlfriend for forgiveness.

By the end of the month, I had collected 110 ratings with an average of 4.2, which beat "Distant Thunder" both in the average rating and in sheer volume of ratings. The story was listed among the top ten of all time at EDF, but dropped off their charts later as other stories were published and received higher marks. Then the whole rating thing vanished when EDF's computer crashed. Right now, still available to read at EDF online, "Deprescience" has three ratings with a five-star average. They preserved the 42 comments, which are kind, and flattering. You can see it all here at http://everydayfiction.com/deprescience-by-mickey-hunt/.

I did get the interview at Flash Fiction Chronicles, but it can no longer be found online. I kept a copy, which follows.

Interview for *Every Day Fiction*

1. You are the author of several short stories as well as a few books. What made you decide to pick up the pen? Do you face any particular challenges when writing flash fiction? Does anything become easier?

Since childhood, I've always loved stories—hearing, reading, and watching them. And I loved reading them aloud to our children. I've read Lord of the Rings aloud four times and most of Harry Potter aloud once. It's fun giving different voices to the characters. (I was a puppeteer once with the Tears of Joy Puppet Theatre.) Making up stories is part of that

love, and it's gotten to be a habit. I hear an odd idea and start filling in the details. Stories are how we organize the facts of our lives into meaning. We learn truth from stories.

Beginning in January of year 2000, I stopped writing opinion pieces and started a novel instead, which I saw as being a more humanly complete form of persuasion.

Flash fiction. It demands a higher level of perfection than a longer format, but it allows it, too, because there's less material. Flash fiction, compared to a longer story, is like a word processing program to a manual typewriter, it makes writing more accessible.

Let's see, does anything become easier? For me, not really, because there's so much more to learn. I hope I'm getting better. Most of my flash pieces are written fast. I can put down the structure for a story in an hour or less. That's the fun part. Then, for a couple days I'm always scribbling down notes to add in. That's fun, too. The hard part is fixing things that come up from critiques. Decision making. What I love about *Every Day Fiction* is the hands-on collaboration from your slush readers and editors. And even though it's hard sometimes to see the weakness that others see, in the end, it's fun meeting the challenges.

2. Memories are a focal point for both "Deprescience" and your mini-biography at the end of the piece. I'm guessing a bit here, but this seems like an important topic to you. Is it or is it just something you've been pondering lately?

I'm 60 now, and more of my downtime mental life is occupied with memory, since the past is a dominant portion of my existence. There's so much of it in comparison.

I wrote in the comments that the story grew out of my own thoughts about growing older, and specifically, my children becoming more independent and establishing their own lives. We have six children and our home was the center of joyful activity. We still have two children living at home, but at 17 and 20, they are more adults than children. But I went through a month or so recently of missing the children when they were younger. They as little children are gone. We have many photographs of a life that's gone. And yet I have to see our future as being rich with possibilities. That what was our past in some ways will also be our future. I don't recall exactly how, but this turned into "Deprescience." I just learned that "we" are expecting another grandchild, so in a practical way the story is true.

3. Can you tell me a little about your writing process?

A story starts with an idea or image, something that jumps out. An odd circumstance or new perspective. The seed then germinates into plot, setting, and characters. A short piece gets written in a passion. A longer piece needs discipline, like a certain number of words per day. I often do extensive research for my stories. A lot of creative aspects of a story come when I'm walking for exercise, when I'm not thinking about anything. The exciting part of writing, other than having people take your fabrications seriously, is when a brilliancy comes to you in the midst of composition. Like, you could never think of that unless you already were deep into the story already. Kind of like finding your way in an old famil-

iar neighborhood after an absence. You could never chart your course from where you are to your destination; you just feel your way and take clues from your surroundings. An example is my current flash in progress. Two words in the text grabbed me by the ears. I played with them on Google search for a couple minutes and found my title, "The Cruller Twist." I won't spoil anything if I say it's about pastries and opera. It started with a remark from my son when he served a cake he made for my wife's birthday party this month.

4. As I read, I found myself wondering if Tim will have to reconstruct the memories of his childhood because he spent his whole life mourning the future. Will he be able to salvage it or must he first learn how to live? Will his future be altered because his visions will begin to impact his present decisions?

I don't know. <laughing> You're asking for a sequel. But, yes, I imagine he will need to process it all through. It's too bad that Grandma won't be there to help him. Likely, not understanding his gift for so long has permanently changed him, but as a writer, that pain he endured will give his work power and depth. I suppose in real life a lot of children endure pain and some of them will be diminished and others will turn their pain into triumph for themselves and others.

Will his future be altered? There's a great body of speculative literature on that question. It's in the marvelous sci-fi film "Push" (2009) where a character says, "The future is always changing." So, of course it changes Tim's future, but exactly *how* is the question. In *Oedipus*, and elsewhere, the actions taken to flee from fate actually bring fate about. In the real world, we all have a certain level of prescience. I mean we can predict results of our proposed actions or non-actions, the outcomes, and it affects our behavior, which changes the future.

And just because Tim sees the future or some aspects of it as it relates to his own life, doesn't mean he will see clearly or make the best decisions. "We see through a glass darkly." The prophets of the Old Testament probably understood little of what they saw. I wrote Tim to be a sincere and compassionate person, so I guess I have hope for him.

5. Do you think that because Tim is "remembering" future, he will be disappointed with it when it arrives, like seeing your favorite childhood movie when you're grown and realizing that it's not as great as you remember it?

Let me think. The element of surprise might be missing, but I don't think his gift alters his life in any essential way. It's something he needs to deal with. I mean, the childhood movie might be better than you remember it. Or, marriage may not be all that the princess imagines—the prince of her dreams might become a cad in middle age. Which, now that I think of it, a good bit of what Tim "preknows" will be tragic. The story, though, mostly plays upon a future filled with bright things, those mentioned in his essay.

I never had this in mind when I wrote "Deprescience"—it's a thought that came to me much later—of how what we've lost will exist in our future. This is from my perspective as a Christian, and that's what God provides in Heaven. I don't mean to preach, but this is just my take.

We gain what we lose, what we give away. The story unintentionally points to this truth.

6. What other projects are you working on now? Are there other stories of yours, either upcoming or published, that you can point readers to?

A few of my stories feature an aspect subversive to the dominant culture, and so some readers might find them oppressive. I hope not.

For general audiences, I think the somewhat fantastical "Miss Thurman's Intervention" might be fun. A young man who is a neatnik does yard work for an older woman who is a hoarder.

I'm trying to find a home now for my sci-fi flash "Spark," which humorously (I hope) explores the question of a finite universe. Congruously, "Spark" is 501 words. I'll soon be seeking a publisher for "Turtle of the World," a longer paranormal environmental tale about the hemlock tree and its real-world nemesis, the woolly adelgid. It brings in a Cherokee creation legend. The story takes place here in western North Carolina.

Then there's the novelette, "Shoreless Ocean of Eternity," which is a completed "time transcendence" prequel to a futuristic novel, Clouds Fall to Earth, about a people who have lived on dirigibles for 1200 years. Writing flash fiction, I'm afraid, is a procrastination from this project.

Once I get tired of submitting a story, I put it on my own website-blog. Readers can find these orphans and links to my few published stories there.

Thank you very much for taking the time to chat with us. Best of luck with all your writing endeavors.

Sure. Thanks so much for the opportunity, and for this amazing publication. You really have something impressive going here.

Bio

Mickey Hunt holds a BS degree in Agriculture from Berea College in Kentucky and a BS in Ag Education from Washington State University. Chaotic terrain, as in his website domain name www.chaoticterrain.com, is an astrogeological term used to denote planetary surfaces where features such as ridges, cracks, and plains appear jumbled and enmeshed with one another.

Folly Blaine recorded a podcast of "Deprescience" that was published online by EDF on May 5, 2014, but it seems to have vanished.

The story was published again in a Kindle Edition of *Beyond Science Fiction* (Issue 9) on July 31, 2015, which is still available on Amazon.

Lastly, here is the author's note that followed the EDF story:

Mickey Hunt *says: "Some of what gives me joy: Memories of fishing with my dad during childhood, walking in Alaska wilderness, strawberries grown on our North Carolina land, wind, playing with grandchildren, Thanksgiving dinner with family all around, clouds, my wife and mother of our children, riding a bicycle in winter down the Blue Ridge Parkway, copperhead snakes, the smell of a beehive, sourwood honey and butter soaking into a homemade biscuit,* The Lark Ascending *by Ralph Vaughn Williams, mild earthquakes, me-*

teor storms, contemplating the brilliant stars, a good story well told."

The photo is of some fantastic, rich red orchids that were among the thousands of blooms in a show at the North Carolina Arboretum.

11. Spark

This story grew out of two experiences, one a week camping at Acadia National Park in Maine. Somewhere about then, I was thinking about how people go to the beach to stare at the ocean, into relative blankness, and how this activity helps a person connect to the immensity of the universe. But then I thought, *what if the coastline was the* edge *of the universe?* Wouldn't tourists want to go there, if it were possible? "Spark" is much like the other experience of when two of my boys took our 17-foot canoe out into the ocean at night from Hunting Island in South Carolina. They rowed some distance while still being able to see the land, then the boat capsized and they had to swim it back to shore.

Here is a "philosophical discussion" I sent when I submitted the story to the *Sci-Phi Journal*, which rejected the story:

> The story explores the idea of a finite universe, one with a definable edge, which ties into the discussion/debate about creation-out-of-nothing as one possible origin of all that is of matter and energy. So, if the universe has a physical edge, what might it be like on the outside? Out of boredom, the three "boys" in the story head out on a lark of magnificent proportions. They travel at or above the speed of light (c) multiplied times the speed of light, which is mathematical nonsense, a flight of fancy. The known universe supposedly is between 13 and 180 billion light-years across, so our intrepid youth flew fast enough (with the safeties disabled, and while they don't specify, sometimes in cryogenic sleep) that in four years, they have traveled far enough that the entire universe appears to them as a faint, infinitesimal spark of light. What did they find out there? Nothing? The story plays off the affinity of people for taking vacations at the edge of wild, "empty" places, like the beach—it's our fascination with mystery and the unknown. Another theme is that of proportion. Compared to the human spirit, the entire universe, as beautiful as it might be, is truly small, almost imperceptible when seen from the right perspective. So, they found perspective. It was scary. Think how lonely it would be. The utter darkness everywhere. Of course, there is the Higgs-Boson (God particle) joke, and the brevity of the story itself that represents the tiny spark of the universe. And when the narrator returns from his voyage, he shows he isn't terribly impressed with what he's seen, but his thoughts turn inward, toward some kind of new entertainment or natural detail, which speaks to the possibility of being overawed so much as to become desensitized. I mean, like when those of us who are casual astronomers get excited over a meteor shower, but we sometimes scarcely notice when our locale on the Earth rotates again toward the Sun, an event happening every single day. On the human scale for the narrator, the universe is bigger on the inside than it appears from the outside.

"Spark" was first published on September 4, 2013 online at *365 Tomorrows* and then again at *Rapid River Magazine* online on January 4, 2016 with the new, and better, blueberry pie ending. The photo is of a cool camping supply store at the edge of Acadia National Park. It had coin-operated hot showers.

12. The Cruller Twist

One of my sons developed Type One diabetes during his senior year in college. The story began when he baked his mother a cake for her birthday, and he commented on not having tasted it as he cooked. I thought this story was my absolute best ever flash fiction piece, but no one else agreed, apparently. It was rejected 22 times, the last being in a big contest where it reached finalist status, in the top 5%. I received critiques from *Every Day Fiction* with their rejection letter, to which I sent a reply based on the following notes. I don't have a copy of the reply itself. The editors said they couldn't tell what the story was about.

> Devil on white (an intro of theme and represents the redeeming of something that once was bad.)
>
> **Dessert/Guy** 1
> "diabolical"
> "decadent" (the word should be interpreted traditionally and not with the contemporary twist.)
> chocolate cake (devil's food)
> gorgeous, insincere waiter who glides like a snake and offers temptation
> "indulgence"
> "nothing about this cake is right"
> Illness
> [bad] choice
>
> **Dessert/Guy 2**
> worth waiting for
> "good choice"
> odd coincidences (providence)
> the self-disciplined, sincere baker dressed in white
> "divine miracle"
> the cherubs
> "organic" (purity)
> paradise
> joy
> the wish (or prayer)
>
> Discussion: The story is about the Cruller Twist bakery. The girls met at Duke University. Lauren had not met Steve because he went to a culinary school instead of college. Lauren's life had been about concert tours, etc, and offering men inappropriate intimacy. (CDs, business cards—her phone number suggesting after-concert trysts.) She's making a change in her life. The temptation refused represents a dramatic turning point. Steve will help her enjoy dessert and control her weight, which represents find-

ing the proper and healthy place for sexuality, and there's a reference to children, the natural result. Perhaps the story needs a subtitle.

The photograph was taken near the Grove Arcade in Asheville.

13. Just Cold

The story was based on the real life and death of Jeffrey Reynolds, who died behind a vacant building in Asheville in November 2012 at age 23. Oddly, another man died in exactly the same place a few days later. The deaths were covered on WLOS TV news. I posted the news story on my YouTube channel, UniversalDirt. I met Jeffrey once. "Just Cold" came out at the *Dead Mule School of Southern Literature* online in April 2016, but I can't find it now.

But my Southern Legitimacy Statement, necessary for publication at the Dead Mule, is still available online, and here, too:

> SLS: Even if I hadn't lived in Kentucky and western North Carolina for the past 39 years and had my six children all born here, I'd still be Southern. The following story happened on my grandparents' place in Washington State when I was young. One day, Grandma marched down from the garden holding a possum by the tail. She set the inert beast on the ground and said it was dead, that she had clubbed it while it dined at the compost pile. This sort of thing was not unusual with Grandma. I tapped it with my toe and its lips curled back. I said it wasn't dead, only pretending. It was dead, she insisted. I told her I'd prove it was alive, that I was going to dispatch, cook, and eat it. She expressed lively revulsion. My grandfather Tim had by then come out on the porch and was watching the argument. Tim had Parkinson's and hadn't spoken a coherent sentence in weeks, but then he said out of the clear blue sky, "Why, possum is a great Southern delicacy, my dear." I'll spare the interesting details except to say, the possum proved me right.

14. Turtle of the World (jtb 1)

My wife and I were walking in a National Forest near our home and thinking about the giant dead hemlock trees when I started making up this story. Years ago I was taking my family to the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest in our VW van, and as we rounded a corner just passed a "Fallen Rocks" sign, a Cherokee man fell over the guard rail in front of us. When we took him home, he offered me a carved turtle. I put this incident into the beginning of the story, but the important difference is that in real life, I declined the gift because I felt it was too generous. I wish now I had accepted it, if only to enrich my memory. I didn't know then the meaning of the turtle. The photo at the end of the story is of a stone-carved turtle at the Cherokee museum in Cherokee, NC.

15. The Tragedy of Bernie the Homeless

I wasn't thinking of U.S. Senator and presidential candidate Bernie Sanders when I wrote this story, but there are some parallels. For instance, Sanders was married in the USSR, which has the bear as a national symbol. I myself kept bees for about 10 years and once killed a bear that was attacking my hives. The story is a deliberate attempt on my part to explore or expose the notion of transgenderism, of human beings feeling the need to change their sex or "gender." It seems a logical result of this that people someday may wish to change their species. In Bernie, it's clear that his impulse is a disorder with disastrous consequences. The story was published first by the UK-based, post-environmentalist Dark Mountain Project in its spring 2016 hard-bound volume (Issue 9), a lovely book with color photos accompanying some of the pieces. *Rapid River Magazine* published the story online on July 9, 2016. The photo is of a mama bear who had two cubs up in a large maple tree (the tree in the foreground) next to our property. My son and his family, including three children, lived there at the time. The bear is making threats.

16. Genius

This is the first story written after my dad took his own life in 2013. That element certainly appears here, in a wistful wish for a different narrative—I had invited him and my mom to live with us—but the story is really a veiled metaphor for my life, not that I have suicidal leanings, which I don't, but that I spent much of my adult life in "frustration and futility" with "the cause" of trying to end the killing of pre-natal children. The miracle apparatus was the miracle of each human life, even in his or earliest stages of development. "Nobody believes me" refers to the many, many people who are blind to this reality. Readers can take the story for what it is on the surface: the realization that towards the end of one's life, family is more important than much of the work we do, that family is a refuge and a comfort when all else seems to have failed, but this was my personal template for its writing.

Stupefying Stories published "Genius" online on March 5, 2015, and *AntipodeanSF* published it in March 2016.

The photo is of a restored classic car that belonged to my printer.

17. Baptism

I wrote this brief story for a *Lascaux Review* contest. The prompt was the photograph described in the story. The top photo on the page is of my mother. The second photo is of mammatus clouds in the sky at sunset west of our house. Some of the photos I took are far more dramatic than this one, but the drama is in the stunning color, which you can see in the Kindle version. A neighbor lady said, "It's the end of the world." Though not intended, the sunset connects to the following story.

18. Attack of the Gravid Amazons

One of my sons is an acoustic engineer. I've been following the monarch butterfly migration for a few years, and this last summer we raised several larvae and watched them transform into chrysalises and then adults. The photo is of a tiny native bee on a green ginseng flower.

19. Odd Fellows (jtb 2)

As research, one recent summer, my wife and I toured Beaufort, South Carolina on bicycle, starting at the public library. This story got heavily workshopped at a UNC-Asheville evening writing class held at the library at the private Asheville School. My wife is descended from signer of the Declaration of Independence, Arthur Middleton, of Charleston, SC. The photo is of the Woods Memorial Bridge in Beaufort, SC heading east, as the characters rode their bikes in the story.

20. Homesick

This story originated as prompts in a creative writing day-class I took at the UNC-Asheville. My prompts for a character were three photographs: 1. A young woman—in her early twenties—veiled and dressed in black, standing near a log cabin. The photo was black and white and looked like it could have been taken in eastern Kentucky, where we lived for two years. I made her a young widow of an underground coal miner who died in a mine collapse. She represented my character's mother. I named him Harold Stumbo, Stumbo, the last name of an eastern Kentucky doctor who once ran for governor. 2. A boy sitting on a burro at what might be a racetrack, the burro tied by a rope held by someone off-camera. I made him Harold as a boy. 3. A woman in a long nightgown and wearing a headscarf. She was mowing the lawn near a rose garden in front of a porch. I made her Harold's wife, and gave her autism. Raiden is the creation of another student, though what he does in my stories is my own invention. Assignments required our characters to interact. "Homesick" was published at *Every Day Fiction* on October 10, 2015. It generated considerable discussion in 48 comments, my favorite comparing the story to John Steinbeck's writing. The photo of a grandchild and friends was taken at Warren Wilson College.

21. The Greenlandic Windows (jtb 4)

The fourth in the timeline of the Jonathan T. Barron series. Each story features a new first-person narrator. I have two additional JTB stories in mind. One is about how Jonathan became involved in paranormal research when he was a soldier in the mountains of Afghanistan and ran into ancient Persian warriors who were fighting against both U.S. allies and the Al Qaeda forces. The other story will have a massive oak tree as the narrator. This photo is of the moon.

22. Leaving Roanoke Island

Another story in the Harold Stumbo series, and unpublished elsewhere. *Every Day Fiction* didn't like it—all the editors voted to reject it. I rejected all of their critiques. Likely, they didn't connect it to "Homesick." A problem of flash fiction is the lack of continuation. The neighbor with binoculars is the creation of another student in my creative writing class. The photo is a shot of my television playing Harold's favorite movie, "The Asphalt Jungle" (1950).

23. Denying the Signs

Yet one more story in the Harold Stumbo collection. I entered this in a *Rapid River Magazine* flash fiction contest and won an Honorable Mention in December 2015. I since have changed one word in the ending. This story takes place before "Leaving Roanoke Island." The photo is of a church on Nantucket Island.

24. Dreaming is Believing

This story only received criticism from an editor at Baen's Bar, but I think it works. The photo is of me walking near timberline on Mt. Hood.

25. Ships Passing in the Night: Romance and Marriage between Lovers from Anti-synchronous Worlds.

The *Mad Scientist Journal* published this first-person extension of "Not the Wrong Planet" in its Autumn 2016 hard-copy book, which can be purchased at Amazon.com. The story is also available online and free at the MSJ's website. "Ahtebazille" is an approximation of what the name "Elizabeth" would sound like in a recording played backwards. I've linked this story to another story, "The Shoreless Ocean of Eternity", by incorporating some of the latter's characters and events. For this WEW book, I ran a Grammarly program and found a place in the story that had "though" instead of "through." It's also wrong in the printed book. Argh. (Note: hopefully, I have just fixed these sorts of errors here. –MH, 9/2025)

The photo is of one of my grandsons at his birthday party.

26. Skirmishing for Food

I was watching lines of black ants at the kitchen sink one day. The ants in the photo are lapping up spilled honey at our table.

Monarch butterflies are featured in Hunt's science-fiction story "Attack of the Gravid Amazons." To see more of his monarch and other color photographs, go to http://chaoticterrainpress.blogspot.com/.
Visit his YouTube channel, ***UniversalDirt.***

Hunt above Devil's Courthouse on the Blue Ridge Parkway in 2014.
PHOTO BY EDITH HUNT